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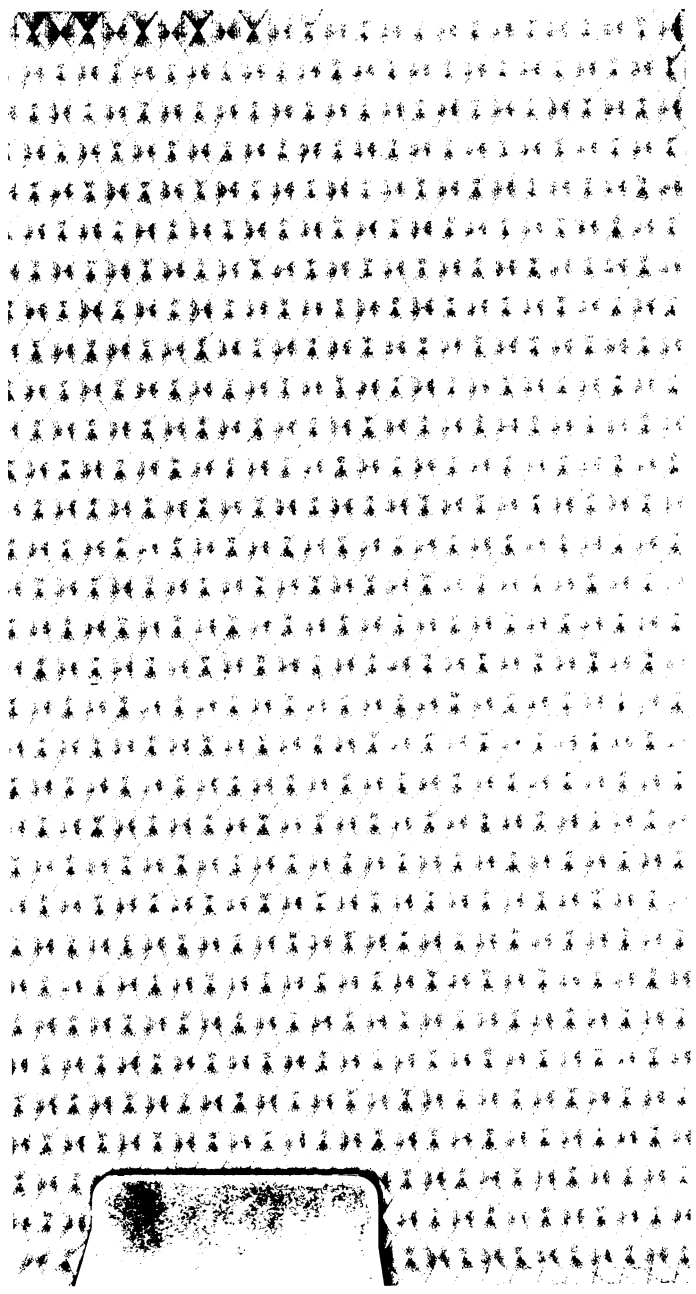
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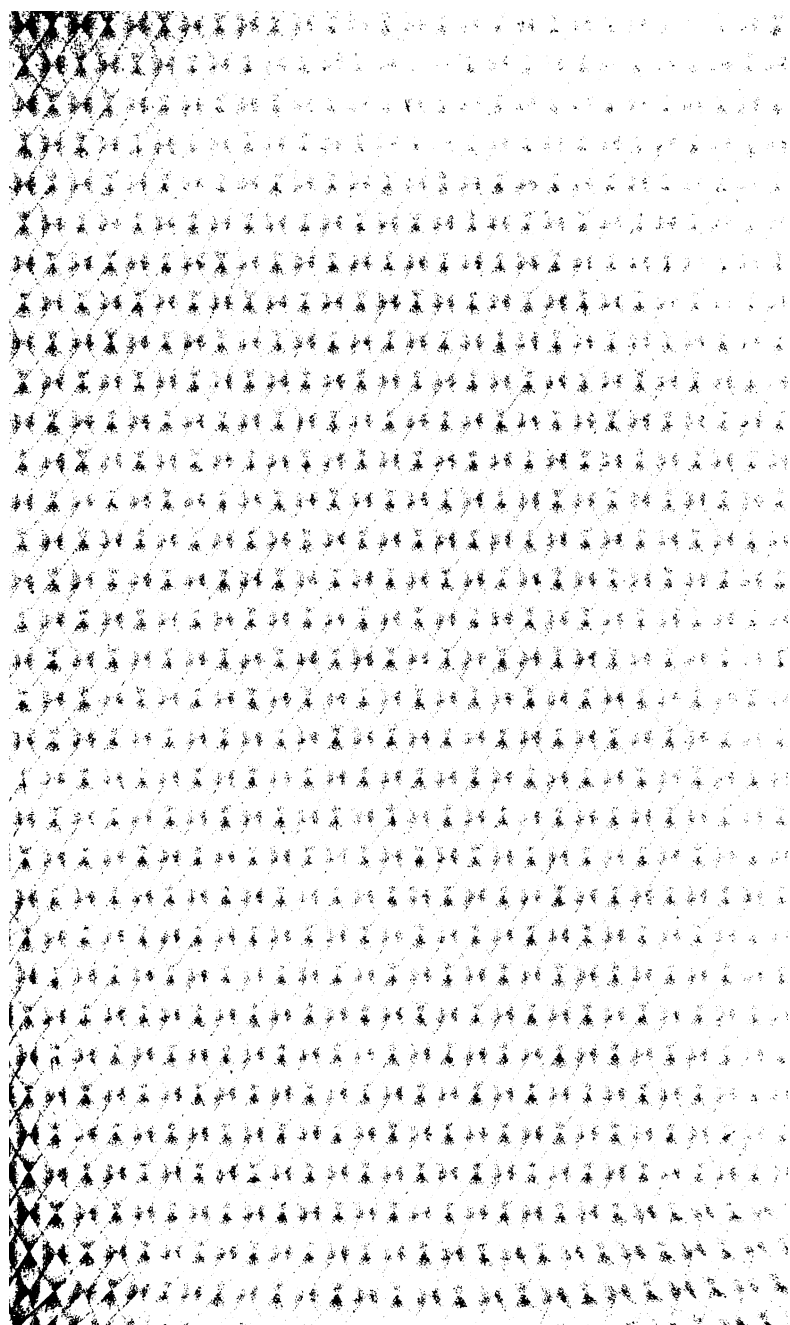
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THE WIND

BY J. R. R. TOLKIEN

THE
WIND





MY WIFE'S NIECE.

A Novel.

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"DR. EDITH ROMNEY."

IN THREE VOLUMES.
VOL. I.



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PART I.

MR. HEATHCOTE.

VOL. I.

I

MY WIFE'S NIECE.



CHAPTER I.

LEWIS GATHERS ROSES.

IT was a lovely afternoon early in June, and the pretty seaside village of Salthurst, nestling snugly on a low and sheltered curve of cliff, was looking its best in the brilliant sunshine. A little to the left of the village as it faced the sea, and farther back from the cliff, was a square modern house of much greater pretensions than any in the place. This had been bought a year or two ago for a summer residence by Charles Heathcote of Thornlea, the rich banker of Opplestone, a small town ten miles from Salthurst.

In the garden of Grove House this

afternoon a young man was strolling up and down. He was of good height, with a slight, supple figure, brown hair with sunny threads in it, and a handsome face which was as attractive as handsome, for the brown eyes looked so pleasantly at the world ; the well-cut lips, not quite hidden by the golden-brown moustache, smiled so genially and frankly. His dress—boating flannels and rich-coloured jersey and cap—seemed to argue an ingenuous care for his appearance, which, however, gave the idea not so much of vanity as of the exercise of a rightful and natural claim to brightness and the best. As he sauntered about, softly humming, or softly whistling snatches of airs, now and then gathering a white rosebud for the bouquet growing in his hand, he looked the picture of prosperous and happy youth—one on whom the sun had always shone, and who found life sweet and pleasant and altogether to his taste.

A musing smile of expectation brightened his gay eyes, sometimes indeed clouded

for a moment by a grave shadow of uncertainty, but the shadow would pass almost at once, and the smile return more eagerly. The bunch of flowers was still small when he stood still to attentively consider and re-arrange it. Every rose-bud had been gathered after most jealous examination, as if the loveliest and purest of delicate blossoms were hardly worthy to be chosen on this especial afternoon, and the task of arranging them to his satisfaction appeared to be a hopeless one. Again and again were they placed, and the effect tested by a critical glance. Finally they were fastened together, not it would seem in the content of success, but rather in despair of it. He held the small bouquet away from him, and contemplated it with a flushing of his handsome face, and a half-doubtful, half-provoked smile.

“Will she take it, or will she not?” murmured he. “She was not gracious last evening.”

His task completed, he began to grow

impatient of waiting; his steps became quicker, his whistling louder, and more than once he looked up at the house. At length he stopped on the gravel walk beneath one of the front windows, and gave a shrill, urgent whistle, supplementing it by a call: "Gussy, are you ready?"

In answer came a flutter of the muslin curtain, a glimpse of something white, and a gleam of something golden, and a sweet, childish, petulant exclamation, "Oh, Lewis! one moment!"

Hardly had Lewis resumed his sauntering when the gate clicked, and an elderly man, rather short in figure, and very erect in carriage, entered the garden, and letting the gate clash noisily behind him, walked with hasty steps up the path. He was flushed and heated with walking, and a frown of annoyance, already visible on his brow, deepened considerably as his eye fell on the young man in his cool careful attire, with the flowers in his hand.

Lewis uttered an exclamation of surprise. "You're early, sir."

"Got the 2.15. Heat was sweltering in town," was the reply, curtly spoken, as the speaker went on to the house.

Lewis followed him indoors, giving his shoulders a slight shrug, and making to himself the private comment, "Put out."

Mr. Heathcote went into the room on the left side of the hall, threw himself heavily and wearily into a large arm-chair, and began passing his handkerchief over his reddened brow. In his youth he had been handsome. Now he might have been taken for a man of ordinary enough looks had it not been for the character and resolution of his face, the power given to it by the keen blue eyes under their formidable grey eyebrows, the proud imperious mouth closing in a firm straight line, and his whole air of consequence and importance. Just at present he had the breathless, fatigued appearance of a rather stout man oppressed by heat. Perhaps his own discomfort made him resent his *protégé's* coolness and ease, and caused him to cast those quick frowning glances

at the young man sitting so composedly on the edge of the library table.

Lewis was quite undisturbed by his senior's evident irritability, and delightfully philosophic about it. Gusts of temper were a part of the privileges of prosperous heads of firms and houses. Lewis, in his happy love-dream, joyous at the prospect before him of spending the next few hours in "her" society, felt himself superbly superior to mundane business cares and mundane sharpness of temper, and superbly ignorant of any cause involving him in unpleasantness. He sat, careless and graceful, the bright light still in his eyes and the pleasant half smile still touching his lips, his gaze bent absently on the exquisite little bouquet—waiting, merely waiting till Gussy's appearance gave the signal for starting.

Mr. Heathcote passed his handkerchief a last time across his brow, lowered his hand with an impatient jerk to his knee, and remarked, "I went up to town with mad Norton this morning. It is too

abominable to think they should have followed us here."

"I thought you knew they were staying at Salthurst," said Lewis, surprised. "They came a few days ago."

"Perhaps the pleasure of travelling to town with the great man himself gave me a greater realizing sense of the fact," said Mr. Heathcote grimly. "If I am to run the risk of being pestered by his nonsense going up to business, I shall request the guard to lock him into the first carriage he enters."

"Was he worse than usual, then?"

"It was not that; he was at his average, I believe, and that's what makes the prospect of his company so appalling. The man is unbearable, and"—with a certain significance—"his cool assumptions and confidence are more unbearable."

Lewis moved uneasily and hesitated.

"You know what I mean, Lewis," said Mr. Heathcote sharply. "You know why they have pursued us—or rather, you—here."

"Sir, if you think——" began Lewis.

"My dear fellow, I do," coolly. "And I have so much respect for your astuteness and penetration as to believe that you think the same. No doubt it would be pleasanter to ignore such small trifles as—as machinations and manœuvres, but no man in his sane senses could do so in so glaring an instance. You know as well as I do that the Nortons are hunting you down for their niece;—no, I am not saying anything about Miss Loraine's wishes or tactics, whatever I may think about them. She has two active champions—don't get excited, Lewis—two *very* active champions behind whom she can shelter herself in charming ignorance of anything so dreadful as scheming. It is decidedly better for a young lady to have able—h'm—what d'ye call 'em?—coadjutors might offend you, you're so particular; but 'pon my honour, it's the only term that occurs to me. However, let's forego too extreme nicety of expression for the sake of expedition. As I was saying, I admit the advisability of

the young lady's having the rough practical part of the chase taken off her hands; I admire the arrangement, and I have a business man's liking for energy and determination, but these should be also tempered with caution and discretion. The combination then would be indeed beyond praise, but quite, too, beyond the reach of our friend Alf Norton and his helpmate. Lewis, they lack caution, their zeal is altogether too indiscriminate and reckless. They see in you the favoured *protégé* of a rich man: good, so far. They act entirely—mind, I say entirely—on the supposition that to live with a man as his son during his life implies and ensures the being left as that patron's heir. Does not this confidence appear to you, to say the least of it, strangely rash for persons bent on securing a rich husband for their niece?"

As he said this, Mr. Heathcote looked full and keenly and with a flash in his eyes at the young man's face, on which a struggle was plainly passing—a struggle

between anger and indignation and the calmness and control dictated by expediency. It was a spectacle that gratified the imperious banker. Had Lewis followed the natural impulse of hot-headed youth, and hot-headed youth in love, he would have spoken out indignantly and impetuously ; as it was, he dared not ; self-interest forbade such speaking out, self-interest more powerful than deference from youth to age, from *protégé* to benefactor. And this recognition of his mastery of the situation exactly suited the elder man's despotic and autocratic nature. Gradually something like a smile touched the corners of his sternly set lips as he watched the other's writhings.

"You may be right about the Nortons, sir," said Lewis, as soon as he could command his voice. "I—believe you are. But I am quite sure that you do Miss ——" (the name was not audible, so distasteful was it to him to mention it in any discussion of this kind) "a great, an immense injustice ;" and his voice trembled

with the repressed energy of this assertion.

Mr. Heathcote turned purple with sudden passion. He had given a most significant hint, a hint which, taken as he intended it to be taken, should have opened the young man's eyes to a clear perception of the insecurity of his position, the complete manner in which he was at the mercy of his patron's caprice, and the danger of thwarting that patron's wishes. All this was suggested by his question; and instead of following his remarks to their dramatic close, the "poor lovesick idiot" had got no further than those references to the young lady's designs, and must needs take up cudgels in her defence! That pregnant hint was thrown away—the warning wasted.

"I don't care two straws about that," he said loudly. "Justice or injustice, it's none the less a fact that that stately young beauty's duty is to secure the first rich husband that offers. To what is Norton's complaisancy to you owing, but to his

belief that *you* are the coming man? Drop a hint that you are by no means sure of—what he believes you to be sure of, and you would not be any longer troubled by his toadyism and attentions. The man disgusted me this morning! His confidence and his undisguised exultation made me long to throw him out of the carriage window.”

“Every one knows what *he* is,” said Lewis. “He has nothing to do with Mrs. Norton’s niece; she is no relation to him at all. I believe she hates him.”

“And yet she is willing to live upon him,” sneered Mr. Heathcote. “She keeps her hatred in good order; it is not allowed to stand in her light.”

“How can she help herself?” replied Lewis, speaking with immense effort, and with a convulsive clenching of his right hand.

“A girl of spirit would help herself sooner than eat the bread of a man she hated. But,” with a satirical smile, “I should say the question of her hatred is

very problematical. Talk about it adds interest to her, of course. The suffering heroine in the uncongenial surroundings is a familiar and favourite character, but not one *I* admire." He broke off abruptly, and the expression of his face changed magically.

Through the open door came the sound of singing in a blithe, girlish voice, which was like a bird's, devoid of any deeper tones of sadness. Light steps ran down the stairs, crossed the hall more slowly, and then came a call of "Lewis!"

"Here," said Mr. Heathcote.

A dainty little figure in pale blue and white boating costume entered the room, with a sunshade tucked under one arm, and a pretty rosebud face framed in blonde hair bent over a serious struggle with the fastening of a glove.

"Oh dear, it won't go in!" she exclaimed. "Here, papa darling, you do it for me."

Mr. Heathcote, whose expression had softened to the gentlest fondness, straight-

ened himself at once in his chair and with touching obedience put his large fingers to the task. Lewis at the same time got off the table and threw back his shoulders with something like a gesture of relief. The banker, looking up suddenly, saw the movement, and frowned. That alert preparation for departure was not on Gussy's account. Her entrance was simply the signal for the ending of a not too agreeable *tête-à-tête*, and the joining of that other one, that impertinent interferer with Mr. Heathcote's wishes.

Gussy's pretty fair face wore an earnest, absorbed expression as she watched the beginning of her father's delicate and important task. After the successful capture of the two first buttons over her plump little wrist, she appeared to think he might be safely trusted to finish the buttoning without further supervision, for she turned her head and smiled saucily at Lewis.

"You were in a great hurry two minutes ago," she said. "You would hardly give me time to make myself presentable. But

you don't look as if you would prove a *very* cheerful addition to a boating party. I suppose, papa," severely, "you have been talking over some horrid business with him?"

"Business—just so, Gussy."

Gussy made a *moue*. "What extraordinary taste you men have!" she exclaimed with great disdain.

"Well, my pet, business is a necessary evil—certainly necessary—even for the comfort of a dear little butterfly like you;" and Mr. Heathcote, having secured the last button and claimed a kiss as reward, leaned back and smiled at his childish daughter. He was quite satisfied with the work of his own training. Gussy's brains had never been required to puzzle over anything more perplexing than an easy drawing-room piece, or some new kind of fancy work. Nothing was asked from her but the amusement afforded by a child's ignorance and playfulness. To her father she was still only a child, to be petted, fondled, indulged, and laughed at when

she said or did something more than usually absurd. The prosperous, self-sufficient man had needed so far no rational sympathy and no help from his only daughter; she was a dear little plaything, and that was all.

"How fine we are, Gussy!" said Mr. Heathcote. "For whom and for what is this splendour intended? Is it to bring poor young Temple to his knees?"

"Oh no! he is there already, you know," said Gussy airily.

Her father laughed with genuine amusement. He was proud of the effect of Gussy's fascinations, and encouraged her coquetry. "As you are bonny, be merciful! Don't be too cruel to the poor fellow; don't drive him to despair!"

Gussy blushed, pouted, and threw back her head. Then all at once she became serious. "Do you think I shall do?" asked she anxiously. And in order to secure proper consideration for this important question, she revolved slowly before the two men, dropped a saucy curtsey, and

glanced from her father to Lewis, challenging a verdict.

Mr. Heathcote also gave a glance at Lewis, as if demanding admiration in an imperious, "Where are your eyes?" style, and finding in the young man's absent look none of the warmth he desired, he turned impatiently and frowningly away.

"Do? Admirably for execution, my darling," he replied fondly. "Where are you going?"

"Oh, for a row to the White Farm, and we are all going to walk home along the cliff in the evening. You can come and meet us if you like, papa dear."

"Many thanks. Who are going with you? The Norton set, I suppose?"

"And—Mr. Temple," said Gussy, very prettily conscious. "But we *must* go! Oh, Lewis, what a lovely bouquet! It will just complete my toilette. I know you gathered the flowers for me!" And she made a mischievous dart at them.

Involuntarily Lewis drew his precious bouquet back. A peal of laughter rang

from Gussy, who knew as well as Lewis did that no thought of her had been in his mind as he chose the roses, and who was quite indifferent too about the fact, for Lewis was "just like a brother," and useless for purposes of flirtation, owing to his infatuation in another quarter.

"So awfully kind of you!" she cried, her eyes sparkling roguishly. "And you chose them so carefully too! I peeped. How many did you throw away as not good enough? It is the sweetest attention!"

Lewis was a fine red hue by this time. He knew that Mr. Heathcote's eyes were fixed upon him, and that his ears were jealously listening to every word. He had recovered his presence of mind, and now offered Gussy the flowers somewhat sulkily, longing to shake her for her teasing. "I didn't gather them for you," he said; "but you can have them if you like."

"Thanks, awfully!" Gussy put her hands behind her and dropped a mocking curtsey. "Not for the world! Keep them

for *her*. You will want all the help you can get to make up your little tiff last night. I see now why you were so hard to please in the garden."

Certainly, Gussy could be very tiresome.

"I am sorry," observed Mr. Heathcote, in a dry measured tone; "I am sorry, Lewis, there is so little in our garden here to satisfy your fastidious taste. What a pity I did not know sooner."

Gussy laughed, taking this as a joke on her father's part, and fluttered out of the room, in a great hurry all at once to start. Lewis followed her, and a moment after the two passed the window.

Mr. Heathcote turned in his chair, and leaned forward to look after them, a queer conflict of admiration and anger on his face.

CHAPTER II.

“THIS WAY AND THAT DIVIDING THE
SWIFT MIND.”

LEWIS's light-heartedness had been somewhat damped by that short interview with Mr. Heathcote, and he was rather silent as he walked by Gussy's side through the village and down the long terrace facing the sea. He could not help resenting the ill-timed unpleasantness. This was not the first time within the last few weeks that he had had to endure some such incomprehensible burst of temper on his patron's part, and he philosophically, and not without the superiority of one able to pity, attributed these exhibitions to the irritability

of physical weakness; Mr. Heathcote's strength was, he supposed, not quite restored after the long illness from which he had suffered in the preceding winter. How otherwise could the sharpness of his sarcasms, the impatience with which he so often looked at and spoke to him, Lewis, his favourite of so many years standing, be satisfactorily accounted for?

He had been brought up by Mr. Heathcote as a son, and since the time, seven years ago, when the banker and his only son had quarrelled and parted in bitterness, Lewis had practically held the position of only son, and was generally regarded, and regarded himself, as the heir. When he stopped to think about the matter, he was ready to acknowledge how deep were his obligations to his patron; only as he had received them from the days of boyhood, when the supply of food and clothing, education, luxuries and pleasures, is accepted as a simple operation of nature, it is hardly to be wondered at that this quiescent taking it for granted spirit should have grown up

with him. To his bright, gay spirit the good things of this world came so naturally. His benefactor's suggestion of some insecurity in his position as a rich man's heir struck him as a rather ungenerous reminder of his obligations, little more ; except, perhaps, a threat promising difficulties and objections to his suit. It was not the first sign of the opposition he might expect on that score, and he was prepared for great toleration and patience, feeling indeed that he could show nothing else as he was about to baulk Mr. Heathcote's wishes in so delicate a matter ; but he was deeply sensible of the utter want of proportion between the benefits given him and the sacrifice demanded in return ; and, moreover, discussion seemed altogether too premature when the affair was so uncertain.

Mr. Heathcote had intimated in language quite guiltless of obscurity that Lewis had only to throw the handkerchief. The young man turned hot at the idea—it was too egregious a mistake ! *He* knew how

false the charge was ; the very doubts and fears that harassed him, the cruel dread of failure that tore his heart, the sickening periods of despair he underwent, gave testimony to the injustice of the accusation. As soon as he had recovered a little from his indignation, he laughed the notion to scorn. It was too absurd ! He thought of her—proud, cold, unaccountable, and not always approachable, and was filled with a sort of tender rage and exasperation at the profane suggestion—an exasperation more than half with her for the difficulty she caused him. Once or twice, indeed, he had almost ventured to hope, but the hopefulness was too transient and slight to warm his courage really ; it was a fancy, gone in a moment.

Even now, as he and Gussy walked down Grove Terrace, he had thrown off greater part of the disagreeable impression produced by the talk before starting, and his thoughts were occupied with wonder and anxiety as to the mood in which he should find her. Would she be gracious

and friendly? or cold and careless and mocking? To hazard a conjecture was useless, as he well knew—there was no counting upon her mood; and his heart was beating with all the excitement of suspense when they reached the last house of the terrace.

Their approach was greeted by a derisive cheer from a plain, dark lad of fourteen, who was leaning over the railings enlivening the tedium of waiting by passing audible criticisms, chiefly depreciatory, upon the people going by. His hope that Lewis and Gussy had not unduly hurried themselves gained no response, for Gussy was entering the garden and smiling her very sweetest upon the fair young man in clerical attire who had hastened to open the gate for her; while Lewis was absorbed in the discovery that the garden did not contain Mildred.

A girl sat in a low wicker chair below the dining-room window, which was rather high—a girl with a face which would never by any stretch of charity or imagination

be termed pretty, but which was singularly pleasant and bright. The grey-blue eyes held a ready laugh in them ; and the quick smile showed a row of even white teeth which added a flashing brilliancy to her vivacious expression. She nodded to the two arrivals, and a gleam of amusement came into her eyes as she noticed the shadow that fell so curiously and swiftly on Lewis's face.

"I'm glad you've come, Gussy," she remarked ; "Mr. Temple has been struggling in vain to detach Rollo from those railings. He—Rollo, not Mr. Temple—has outraged the feelings of so many holiday-makers that I quite expect him to be torn limb from limb the first time he ventures forth alone, and sent back to Uncle Alf in neat brown paper parcels."

Young Norton was undismayed by the gruesome details of his cousin Kate's prophecy, but he had tired of his amusement and dropped from the railings.

"Well," exclaimed he, "now you've come, let's start."

"We must wait for Mildred," cried Gussy.

"Oh, Mildred isn't going."

"Not going?" echoed two voices, a very perceptible accent of dismay in the man's.

Rollo grinned with, perhaps, sympathetic appreciation at Lewis. "She's in the sulks," said he.

Just then a girl appeared above at the wide-open window. The supple lines of the upper part of her tall slim figure were shown distinctly against the dark space of the room behind, and the same shadowy background threw out the fair face, with its finely-chiselled features and lovely outline of cheek and chin. Her hair and eyes were dark, and made the fairness and purity of her complexion the more noticeable; the whiteness was warm and healthy, in spite of the impression of exotic delicacy given by the whole face. Upon it rested a shadow, half of discontent, half of sadness, but certainly not fitly described by Rollo's term—a boy's vocabulary is seldom equal to description of the finer moods.

Those in the garden looked up at her : Rollo, with an audacious grimace ; Kate, with a whimsical intelligence in her bright eyes ; while Lewis raised his cap, feeling, as he had felt so often before on suddenly seeing her face, a quickening of his heart-beats and a rush of the blood from his cheeks.

"What is that atrocious boy saying about me ?" she said.

"You *are* going, Mildred ?" cried Gussy.

"I—don't know. It is hot," observed Mildred. "Why should we go to the White Farm? What is to be seen when one gets there?" she added, quite conscious of the provoking nature of her objections to one anxious listener. In her present dissatisfied mood it gave her some slight pleasure to provoke her adorer.

"We go for the row!" exclaimed Gussy.

"But we need not row there, we can go to another place," said Lewis. "If there is one you would like?" with deference and hesitation.

"No," replied Mildred ; "I can't take

any burden of choice in this weather. I find it quite enough to do to decide whether to go out or not."

Lewis's face clouded with disappointment; he turned half away. Mildred gave him a faintly amused glance, then laid her arms along the window sill and leaned out a little.

"I wish you would make haste and decide!" cried Rollo impatiently. "Are you coming or are you not?"

Rollo's voice, of a more vigorous and penetrating quality than the voices of the others, had reached a pair of ears further in the room. A second figure came hastily to the window; a comely lady, with chestnut hair, blue eyes and soft pink cheeks, showed herself beside the girl.

"What is this?" she said good-humouredly. "Mildred not going? Of course she is going," laying her hand on her niece's shoulder. "She is only talking nonsense," looking pleasantly down at the others, and her glance, as it lingered on Lewis, was almost apologetic.

"She is not ready," remarked Gussy.

Mrs. Norton smiled. "Her hat is here," she said, leaving the window. Mildred remained for one moment exactly in the same attitude, then slowly uplifted herself and also withdrew. She met her aunt in the middle of the room, silently took the hat from her, and put it on without a glance at the mirror over the fireplace.

"Here are your gloves," said Mrs. Norton.

"Thank you." Mildred as she took them looked down at her aunt with a mocking little smile.

"How can you be so foolish?" said Mrs. Norton in a low, urgently remonstrating tone, as she stood by hurrying on this very simple toilet. "How can you treat him so?"

"I don't know," carelessly, but with a frown.

Mrs. Norton sighed and made a tragic gesture. "You will do it once too often, and then——!"

"Ah, then? what then?"

"You will be sorry!" in the same emphatic way.

Mildred laughed. "I meant, what would be the effect upon *him*? Would he withdraw his favour? Should I be really deserted?"

"Mildred!" in a tone expressive of impatience in its last stage. "You really are—" but Mrs. Norton appeared to find a difficulty in saying what her niece was. She looked at the pale lovely face with the beautiful eyes under the shadow of the broad hat, and over the slim figure in its simple dark blue linen dress, and a queer struggle of admiration and annoyance was visible on her disturbed features. How *could* the girl be so provoking? She had only to stretch forth her hand, and the prize would be hers, and yet—

"I sometimes think," said Mildred musingly, as she pulled on her second glove, "that I should like to do it that 'once too often.' I should like to study the effect. It would be a new experience."

"A very unpleasant one ! I don't know *what* Mr. Norton would say !"

Mildred's face darkened. She finished drawing on the glove with a jerk, took up a sunshade from the table, and went quickly out of the room.

Mrs. Norton, inwardly perturbed, outwardly smiling, stood at the window to see the young people start. She watched them cross the road and go down the slope leading to the sands, and then returned to her easy chair and novel. And as she settled herself comfortably again she cast a sigh to her match-making anxieties. "What a strange girl Mildred is !" thought she. "How long does she suppose a man will submit to be held off ? Any one less infatuated than Lewis Ingram would have given her up in despair. They were walking together, anyway," and consoled for the nonce by this reflection, Mrs. Norton opened her second volume. She would have a quiet afternoon all to herself, and being the mistress of a noisy household, she was not slow to appreciate and seize

the unusual luxury. Her two youngest step-sons had gone fishing ; Rollo and the "young people" were safely disposed of ; and last, but by no means the least aid to peace, Mr. Norton was spending the day in town and would not dine at home. Mrs. Norton breathed another sigh as she leaned back, and this time it was one of luxurious satisfaction. The room was cool and shady and silent. Outside, the sun was bright, and the sea was a soft dreamy blue ; while the ceaseless coming and going of holiday-makers seemed to add to the stillness within, the restless stir of feet to heighten the repose by contrast. It was not disturbing, but soothing, and soon lulled her into a peaceful doze.

The arrangement that pleased her aunt was not so grateful to Mildred. She was in a doubting, contradictory frame of mind, and the easy way in which by tacit consent she and Lewis were left as companions struck her with a curious little shock—so naturally did it appear to come to pass ; and what startled her even more was the

involuntary, matter of course fashion in which she herself fell into the arrangement. Her first impulse was to rebel at having things decided for her, but half from languor, half from a recklessness that swayed her at times, she let the opportunity go by.

Lewis gave two glances at the grave downcast face, and then ventured to offer his flowers. "Will you have them?" he said, trying to speak carelessly. Mildred looked dubiously at his offering, held out her hand and took the bouquet hesitatingly, as though not by any means certain whether to keep it or not. "Thank you," she said mechanically.

"Ought I to let him give me flowers when I— If I don't take care I shall cut myself off from any power of choice," she thought, as she examined the rosebuds. "I'm not sure whether I have not done so already. Oh dear!"

Lewis was anxiously watching the troubled face. "Have you discovered a cankered petal? I hope not, for I chose

them very carefully—of course,” with a nervous laugh.

“They are very lovely,” said Mildred. She tucked the nosegay into the band round her waist. That done, with one of her sudden changes of manner—changes which were so incomprehensible and bewitching to Lewis—she flashed a bright smile at him. “Are they a peace-offering?”

“A peace-offering?”

“For last night. Don’t you remember our little quarrel? If they are, I assure you they are accepted in a truly forgiving spirit. I never bear malice.”

“In this instance,” said Lewis drily, “I really see no reason why you should.”

This little spurt of spirit brought an outburst of unfeigned amusement from Mildred. The frank laughter appeared to dissipate her discontent for the time, and she was cheerful and gracious for the rest of the walk to the starting-place.

There they found Kate engaged in animated negotiations with the boatman.

Her cool inspection of his boats, her frank criticisms and curt rejections, had brought a grin to the worthy man's countenance, and he purposely offered his more unattractive vessels in order to enjoy the young lady's audacious comments. She had just objected to the colour of the fourth pointed out to her, observing with mild and reproachful significance that they wished to hire a *pleasure* boat, when Lewis and Mildred reached the group.

The boatman folded his arms and assumed a stolid front. "It doesn't seem, sir, as if you'd get much of a row to-day," he said to Lewis.

"Why, what's the matter, Bill? Boats are not all out, surely?"

"According to this lady's ideas of what boats is—mine don't suit her."

"Well," said Ingram, "it doesn't do to be too particular."

"It do not, sir. It do not," blankly.

Kate smiled coaxingly upon him. "Now, Bill, for once—just for a change, you know!—be obliging!"

"I've offered you four boats, ma'am," in an injured tone.

"You have!"

"Three and a tub," corrected Rollo pertly.

"Three and a tub," said Kate. "But we only want *one*. Why don't you offer that one, Bill? You know the boat I mean!"

Apparently Bill did, for after a little more shuffling and reluctance, he gave an order, and a very graceful pretty boat was pulled down to the edge of the water. Kate in triumph led her party to it.

"The greedy old curmudgeon!" she exclaimed. "It goes to his heart to have his decent boats used. Fancy trying to palm off those crazy dingy tubs when he had *this*, and he knew that I knew he had it."

"Then it was all an elaborate game between you two?" said Lewis, as he helped her in.

Kate nodded gaily, took her seat and began drawing off her gloves at once.

"I'm going to row," she exclaimed. "Are you, Mildred?"

"No," said Mildred dreamily.

Ingram's eyes lit up with pleasure. He should be able to look at her then.

"Mr. Temple!" cried Gussy, imperiously. "Don't row!"

"Why?" asked Arthur, who never thought of disputing the command, but who relinquished the pleasure rather sadly, for although but an indifferent rower, he loved the exercise.

"Because you row so badly, and I don't want to be sprinkled," was the prompt reply.

"Cover your finery, Gussy," said Kate brusquely. "I may take a fancy to dispense shower-baths all round. I feel in the humour for aquatic sports. I prophesy that I shall distinguish myself greatly this afternoon," with some malicious relish as she grasped her oars. "Now, Rollo, dear boy, if you could dispose of those restless legs of yours with some degree of comfort to your neighbours, we might manage to start."

“Miss Norton’s impatience is not to be controlled when she gets a pair of oars into her hands,” said Lewis, laughing for very joyousness of heart. He had secured the seat he coveted, facing Mildred, and a sweet keen rapture thrilled his pulses. “Ready?” he cried gaily, as he bent to his oars, and the boat moved buoyantly through the summer wavelets.

Mildred, silent and dreamy in the stern, saw half curiously from under drooping eyelids the brightness of her lover’s look, and her troubled doubts returned in full force. She knew that proximity to her, the power of gazing at her, caused that joyousness of well-being: it was strange, pitiful, almost terrible. For a moment she had a half wish to be touched herself by corresponding warmth—it would have simplified matters so! She would not then be the prey to these fits of doubt and perplexity; her course would be quite clear. It was hard that she should not be helped in that way. She was annoyed at the pertinacity of her distracting thoughts that

afternoon ; she had not been able to shake them off in her usual half weary, half reckless fashion, to enjoy a respite from the sense of responsibility. Proud as she was, and she was very proud, with all the quivering sensitiveness of one in an unhappy and dependent position, she yet hesitated whether or no to accept for mere worldly reasons a man whom she did not love. No one could be so painfully aware of this anomaly as Mildred herself, and the constant struggle against her own nature caused her much suffering and humiliation. She despised herself for her hesitation, and yet she still hesitated. Her pride, in fact, was pulled two different ways, for marriage would only be a transfer of obligations. By accepting Lewis, she would get free from her present galling position of dependence upon her aunt's husband, and she sometimes felt that no sacrifice was too great for the securing of that freedom.

Mrs. Norton had brought her up almost from babyhood as her own child, and Mildred had given in return the love and

reverence of a daughter to a mother. Two years ago, when she was seventeen, her aunt, after only a year's widowhood, had married Mr. Norton, and the cruel disillusioning Mildred went through then had shaken her trusting, daughterly affection. Her aunt had married to free herself and her niece from poverty ; but the girl could make no allowance for the temptation, and her severe judgment from that lofty moral standpoint so characteristic of intolerant youth, had weakened the bond of sympathy between them. Mrs. Norton justified her act to her own self by arguments of weight. Was she to throw away such a chance of lifting herself and her adopted daughter out of the mire of poverty simply because of certain little drawbacks ? It was only foolish youth, ignorant of the proportion of disadvantages with advantages in this weary world, which could be fastidious. In her heart of hearts she was ill at ease and aware how far she was falling from her high estate in making this marriage of convenience with a vulgar man, and she

would have liked to receive at least sympathy and condolence for her sacrifice from the one to share its profits.

It was precisely that being forced to take her share of the advantages which galled Mildred. She had been too young at the time of her aunt's marriage to help herself, and although the idea of working for her living visited her fitfully, the prejudices of her set and upbringing were too strong to be lightly defied; then of course there was the escape through matrimony. Her education had taught her to regard marriage as her only destiny, and she had contemplated the prospect of what appeared so natural and inevitable much as she contemplated the succession of the seasons. It was only when the opportunity was actually presented to her and she became the victim of open manoeuvring, that she doubted and hung back, feeling as never before the intolerable humiliation of her position. What had seemed so simple was, when it came to the point, difficult and formidable. Her whole

nature revolted against the baseness of deliberately selling herself, and yet submitted to be lowered to the consideration of pleas for expediency and advisability.

So she was swayed, first to one side and then to the other. At times, when Mr. Norton's "ways" grated on her every nerve, and all her fastidiousness was offended, she would almost determine to free herself with Ingram's help; and then again she would shrink in horror from the injury both to herself and to him. For she could not pretend to imagine that he perceived her difficulty and would need no deceiving—her yes would be to him confession of a return of his great love. And the knowledge of this increased her hesitation; his utter belief in her seemed to throw too bright and searching a light upon the meanness of mercenary motives. It would have been easier had he believed in her singleness of motive and simpleness of heart only one degree less!

Sometimes she was disposed to feel angry with him for that undeserved reverence

which hurt her like a sad reproach. Why should he imagine her to be so fantastically, impossibly free from all taint of worldliness? Why could he not judge her rationally, and from the common sense point of view, with regard to the necessities of her hard position, and allowance for the natural consequence that she should have learnt to face the realities of the world and care for money and a secure future? His blind trust in face of so many facts to shake it, touched, vexed, humbled her by turns; it was unreasonable.

Meanwhile, beneath all her uncertainty was the suspicion that delay was putting it out of her power to refuse, unless indeed she was prepared to lay herself open to the charge of false encouragement. And tired as she was of the struggle, she was recklessly inclined to drift still longer, and let circumstances decide it for her as they would.

CHAPTER III.

"HIS LOVE HAS LEAVE TO HOPE."

SHE was very quiet during the row, and Lewis was almost as quiet. Looking up suddenly once, Mildred caught his eyes fixed upon her, and perceived from their anxious questioning that her grave abstraction had affected his spirits, sensitive and dependent through his deep love. She gave him a faint, troubled little smile, and at the quick, bright, responsive change turned away her head, an actual mist dimming her eyes. "Oh, this is terrible," she thought, dismayed; and for perhaps the first time a passionate wish that she could return his love came over her.

The others were gay and lively enough. Gussy kept up a stream of chatter, ad-

dressed chiefly to Arthur, who sat in a constrained position at her feet, gazing up with fascinated eyes at every movement of the small coquette, and perfectly happy ; while Kate and Rollo found fault with each other's rowing, with vows and threats of dire import and much sparring, all in great friendliness and unruffled good-humour.

They reached the White Farm shortly after five, and while the others rested in the tiny garden at the front, Kate penetrated to the inner regions in quest of food, followed closely by Rollo, whose gallantry and devotion were conspicuous on foraging expeditions. He came back soon, rubbing his hands and radiant.

"We're in luck," cried he. "The old woman's just baking teacakes. We caught her in the act, so there could be no dodging about 'nothing but bread and butter in the house,' etc.," with lackadaisical mimicry and a ferocious gloom which showed that, young as he was, he had drunk deep of life's disappointments.

"Hot teacakes!" exclaimed Lewis, in apparent ecstasy. "Oh, Rollo, gentle imp! you are sure you secured them?"

"Kate has," replied Rollo, seating himself on a bench in the calm of blissful expectation. "She'll order enough, and see that the old lady puts on enough butter, too. I say," he added, spreading his hands on his knees and looking round on the others, "aren't you glad you came *now*?"

He was at once earnestly assured that they would not have stayed away for anything; that the pleasure of watching his hearty enjoyment alone would cause them always to look back to this day with, etc.

Tea was brought to them in the garden, and was a very merry meal. The teacakes proved excellent, and Rollo's notions of "doing justice" to fare he approved of were on such a liberal scale as to win for him the undisguised admiration, even awe, of the landlady and her young handmaid.

It was already decidedly cooler when they started to walk home. Their way lay over the fields at the edge of the cliff,

which was high and precipitous near the White Farm, and grew gradually lower as it neared Salthurst. Gussy had many little fits of terror when the narrow foot-path was broken and irregular, and went as she thought dangerously near the cliff's edge, and needed much help and support from Arthur. Kate and Mildred stepped on as lightly and fearlessly as birds over the rough places as easily as over the smooth. The delicate colour came into Mildred's cheeks as she walked ; for in spite of her troubles and perplexities she could not help enjoying the sweet evening air which came so softly to her face. On their right was the sea, grey and quiet, and so smooth that it hardly stirred the brown seaweed covering a level stretch of rocks at the foot of the cliff. They could see the beach of Salthurst, crossed here and there with shining water-courses and tracts of wet sand. The sky was a very tender blue, and further softened by white trailing clouds of radiant transparency and brightness.

The loveliness of the evening tempted

them to stop for another rest in the last field, where the girls perched themselves on the low grass-grown wall which served the purpose of hedge, and the young men and Rollo lay on the grass. Presently, however, Kate's roving eye detected a farmhouse two fields further inland, and she sprang to her feet with an alert call to her cousin, who was beginning to give ominous signs of an impending fit of melodiousness. Kate's movement, therefore, was unresented by the others.

"They may have chickens there," she said. "I promised Aunt Adela to do my best to get some. Will you wait here for us, good people?"

"Miss Norton is absolutely indefatigable," murmured Ingram lazily, as Kate and Rollo jumped from the low bank into the next field and walked off by the path near the hedge.

Gussy looked after them, hesitated, and then extended an imperious small hand to Arthur as an intimation that she wished to be helped up. He stumbled to his knees

so awkwardly in his hurry to obey the gesture, that Gussy's lips curled with disgust. She rose unassisted, shook her pretty plumage, and sprang down into the next field. Arthur of course did the same, and they followed Kate.

"How rough she is upon that poor fellow," observed Lewis. "I wonder he stands it."

"What would you have him do?" inquired Mildred, pulling a blade of grass and examining it closely.

"Do?" he laughed. "Well—show her a little spirit."

"How?" asked Mildred, very languidly, but also with some curiosity.

"Don't you think he is rather too abject?"

"That is a question, not an answer," quickly.

"He must know that she is only amusing herself with him," remarked Lewis.

"Well," said Mildred, after a pause, "he shares the amusement. It takes two for a flirtation."

"I don't know whether Temple does share the amusement," said Lewis, plucking at the grass and speaking slowly, as if reluctant to differ from her even in the slightest degree. "I rather fancy it is more the case of 'what is sport to you is death to me.'"

Mildred laughed, but not mirthfully. "You *are* taking the matter gravely!" she exclaimed. "What serious, even tragic words to use, and about poor little Gussy, too! Do you really believe in all those old-fashioned romance properties?"

"What old-fashioned romance properties?" he asked, glancing up at her suddenly.

Mildred looked away in some excitement. Here was an opportunity for opening his eyes, or at least of disenchanting him with her. In his state of simple earnestness, a little cynical mockery, some show of scepticism about deep feeling, would surely cause a disillusioning shock. But she felt the expression of his eyes as they rested upon her, and the deed seemed too ruthless.

"I am talking nonsense, I believe," she said. "You have infected me. It is too absurd to suggest such woeful possibilities about poor little Gussy's play—to hint at a broken heart for Mr. Temple. I thought we had grown too enlightened to believe in broken hearts."

"I don't think I have," said Lewis in a low voice.

A restive look came into Mildred's dark eyes; any hint of feeling or earnestness in his talk roused in her a curious shrinking and distaste. She pointed across the field, which dipped down into a mimic valley and then rose steeply up a rough, high bank, fringed by a guard of dead sticks and leaves, blotting out in front of them the grey, dreamy sea.

"When we passed there I fancied I saw some wild roses on those bushes in the valley," she said. "Would you get me some?"

Lewis sprang up with eager alacrity, delighted at being asked to do anything for her.

Mildred watched him as he crossed the field. "I don't see why *you* should be contemptuous about Arthur Temple," she thought, smiling faintly. How earnest he was! how absurd it was for Lewis Ingram,—gay, careless, debonair Lewis Ingram—to talk about broken hearts! The phrase had given Mildred an uncomfortable little chill; it was extravagant in the extreme—she knew it was not to be taken literally—but it stuck to her, and a tone in Ingram's voice haunted her. She thought of him more seriously than she had done before—the greatness of his love, which seemed to add to his character the force and depth it lacked, won or rather wrested from her respect. She began to be startled at the consequences of her trifling and wavering. Till to-day she had looked down upon him, to say the truth, reading him as superficial; bright and lovable certainly, but devoid of the characteristics that had power to rouse the esteem she would desire to give to the man who gained her hand. She liked Lewis very

much ; had there been no question of anything more between them, would have been "fond of" him. After all, why should not that be enough? Was she unreasonable and romantic in fancying that more was required? Was it necessary to hesitate because she did not feel that passion of love about which so much was said?

Mildred caught at the new suggestion. "Perhaps I am utterly absurd all this time," she thought, with ready self-mockery; "my scruples may be only so much ignorance and delusion. But"—and as if in answer to her would-be scepticism came the recollection of Lewis's love and reverence for her. She crushed her hands together in a sort of transport of perplexity and impatient weariness,—then laughed at herself.

For a moment or two she idly watched Lewis while he sought for flowers, his figure, in the changing and always graceful attitudes, as he stooped or reached or climbed, well defined against the sombre green of the incline. Presently he went

out of sight behind the slope. Mildred looked round. How still and peaceful it was, with the hush of evening over everything. No sound of voice or step of human being was to be heard, nothing but the occasional note of a bird. The side of heaven on her left was flooded by the beams of the sun which was getting rather low, the sea quivered in a luminous haze.

“A brightness soft
As of the angels moving down to see
Illumined the broad space.”

Mildred's restlessness of heart seemed strangely out of place ; her worldly motives and calm calculations, harsh incongruities. A humble perception of this came to her, bringing, too, gentler thoughts—regrets for the sweeter, more childlike singleness of nature she had surely lost. A softer, more compunctious feeling for Lewis Ingram was aroused ; a second time that day she wished that she could return his love. “If I did that, I should make up for my carelessness and hardness.” She felt even moved her-

self as she imagined the happiness her love would cause him.

Why should love for him not come in time—after? It often did.

She had been idly plucking at the top of the grass-grown wall on which she sat, and looking down at her fingers now, she found that she was pulling a dog-daisy to pieces. The white petals lay strewn upon her lap. On an impulse she threw the spoilt flower away and chose another. "I'll try my fortune," she thought. "Is it to be, or is it not to be? Yes, or No?" and one by one she pulled off the petals.

The last was "Yes." Mildred threw the stalk away, and picked another daisy. She was only playing, and yet she had grown interested in this mock appeal to fortune-telling.

Looking up half way through the second trial, she saw Lewis returning across the grass. The sun had already cast a glittering pathway of gold upon the water-courses on the sands, the glory of strong sunshine flooded the field and caught the advancing

figure of the young man. He quickened his pace when Mildred raised her head—he had been taking in the pretty picture of the slender, dark blue figure, with musing delicate face bent over the daisy, against the pale background of ærial distance—and soon stood before her, smiling. The sunlight had got into his curly hair, he was flushed with his exertions, his frank, glad eyes shone. As Mildred looked up at him, standing before her so handsome, bright and strong, an expression of irrepressible admiration flashed into her eyes. Next moment she lowered her eyelids, and blushed as she had never yet blushed under his gaze, in shy deep confusion and consciousness.

There was an instant's breathless pause; then Lewis dropped on one knee before her.

"Do you see what I am doing?" she said unsteadily.

"No," came in a more unsteady voice than hers.

"I am trying my fortune."

"Ah, don't!"

"Don't? Why? I must finish," hurriedly. "One moment."

She pulled off the remaining petals, and at the last one turned pale.

"Well?" half eagerly, half fearfully. "What is it?"

Mildred threw away the stalk, hesitated, and then, with a sudden thrill of pleasure and the breathless excitement of one conscious of playing with edged tools, she raised her beautiful eyes, shy and gentle and sweet, and smiled tremulously at him. "It was—yes."

Again the silence was intense. It was broken by sounds of voices and laughter. Lewis rose to his feet. He was pale, and on his face was an almost solemn look of gladness as he held out a handful of wild roses.

"These are all I could find," he said in a lowered tone, as if the hush of the evening infected him.

Mildred had just taken the flowers and murmured her thanks, when Rollo scrambled

over the bank, and waved his cap wildly while he executed a triumphant *pas seul*. "We've been successful this time," shouted he. "Such loves of chickens! Why, holloa! if there isn't the mater and the kids!" and he rushed down the field.

"Let us go too," said Mildred, rising. She shook off the white petals, and with Lewis at her side went to meet her aunt. Neither spoke as they stepped over the sunny grass together.

Mrs. Norton, who had just climbed the low stile, came hurriedly towards them, Percy and Walter frisking before her like young puppies and uttering derisive cries to their brother.

"Where are the others?" asked Mrs. Norton, when they met. She did not, strangely enough, look particularly gratified at finding her niece and Lewis together in this way. She came between them and took possession of Mildred by putting her hand on her arm, to the girl's faint surprise. "You have been a long time, my dear," she said.

The others joined them ; there was a little chatter, and then they all moved homewards, Mrs. Norton still holding Mildred's arm and walking on fast, so that Lewis was left to Kate. Her aunt appeared so ill at ease that Mildred asked, not with anxiety or even curiosity, for she knew how easily her aunt was disturbed, if anything was the matter.

"Nothing, of course. What should be the matter?" was the reply, and Mildred drifted into her musings again.

At the door of Grove Terrace House they stopped for Lewis and Kate, but Lewis was not asked to spend the rest of the evening with them as Mildred expected. Mrs. Norton held out her hand and smiled at the young man with unusual constraint.

"You have to dine with Mr. Heathcote, I suppose? We mustn't keep you," she said.

Mildred felt a close warm clasp of her hand when her turn came, and blushed brightly with this strange new softness of feeling towards him on seeing the grave gladness

of his expression. She went upstairs and to her room with the glamour of those few minutes in the field still about her, a dreamy, quiescent influence both new and restful. Had she not found the desired way out of her difficulties?

Her aunt followed her into the room, and after fidgeting a little observed abruptly, as though unable to keep silence any longer, "What a strange man Mr. Heathcote is!"

"Is he?" asked Mildred absently.

"Most unaccountable!"

This did not bring the "In what way?" desired, so Mrs. Norton was obliged to proceed without encouragement.

"Really," she said, drawing off her gloves, "it is very trying not to be sure of things."

"It is," assented Mildred from her heart.

"Ah, you feel that too, my dear?" eagerly.

"Oh, I am always feeling it," in a cold tone of reserve.

"I didn't mean in that general sort of way, of course. One can't be sure of a great many things," with a sigh. "But I do most certainly think that people ought not to wilfully keep other people in uncertainty about *important* matters. That is so very trying—not knowing who's who and—what a man's position is."

"Ah!" murmured Mildred below her breath. She began to suspect the drift of her aunt's remarks. "Well," she said aloud, as she took Lewis's rosebuds from her band and began putting them in water, "We know pretty well what Mr. Heathcote's position is. He couldn't be living as an impostor all these years, could he?"

"My dear, what absurdity! Mr. Heathcote of *all* men! No, if any man is substantial, *he* is," said Mrs. Norton, with immense reverence. "*His* position is firm enough. My only fear is," significantly, "that he has been keeping us in the dark about another person's." Mrs. Norton made what she felt to be an effective pause, but did not receive the satis-

faction of having her speech followed by an anxious question. However, she must deliver her mind, and she seated herself with deliberation.

"I was so vexed this afternoon," she said plaintively. "I had prepared myself for such a quiet time after you had gone, thinking I should have it all to myself and enjoy a peaceful read—in fact, I was in the most delicious doze, when Mr. Norton burst in upon me."

A slight smile twitched the corners of Mildred's lips as she bent over her flowers. "What a perfectly descriptive phrase," she said to herself.

"I never was so surprised," went on Mrs. Norton, whose mind, Mildred could not help thinking, should by this time have become quite incapable of surprise on the matter of her husband's actions. "I thought he was safe till night—he declared he should dine in Opplestone. But it appears that he had been disturbed by some hint Mr. Heathcote let fall as they went up to town together this morning."

"Mr. Heathcote let fall a—hint?"

"Yes; just fancy——"

"And Mr. Norton saw it?" said Mildred in a tone of amazement, beginning to unfasten her dress.

"Saw it? Oh, you are joking! After all, I don't see why you should say that. I am sure Mr. Norton is quick enough—I only wish sometimes he were not a quarter as quick. He is always imagining that he is insulted or slighted, and it is so extremely awkward."

"Yes, poor auntie," softly.

"My dear, I am not complaining," hurriedly. "One can't help feeling tried by those little disagreeables at times, but at the same time there are much worse things to put up with, and no one can deny that Mr. Norton's heart is in the right place. That cannot be said about every man," said Mrs. Norton nervously, casting a glance of wistful appeal at her niece, whose face had assumed the frozen look of non-committal neutrality her aunt knew so well.

This was the old sore, never wholly healed. The poor lady was still visited at times by moments of pure regret for the loss of the lofty position she had held in Mildred's daughterly love and reverence ; for the loss of the blind belief and honour which are the loveliest and most touching things of youth, the most precious homage older people may receive. And this sorrow was true and pure, mixed though it was with weaker, more selfish regrets. She would have dearly liked her great mistake to be countenanced by Mildred's approval ; her yielding disposition craved the support of a stronger nature. Her respect for Mildred was so great that she desired to stand well in her eyes. But that eloquent protest conveyed in the involuntary dismay and shock of revolted feeling when the girl understood the depth to which her aunt had lowered herself, had hurt Mrs. Norton sorely, and perhaps removed one source of resistance to her deterioration of character under her new influences. She might have been truer to her finer nature

And her past life had her marriage not killed the trust and respect in this one young and innocent heart, the continued gift of belief helping to supply its own exactions. But she was weak, and her feelings became blunted as she adapted herself to the rough nature of her new husband. She had moments of consciousness of this, and although they troubled her less and less often as time passed, and she always hastened to resist them in the no-good-crying-over-spilt-milk spirit, they would even now recur, and sometimes with a sharpness of sting which surprised her ; while she would long for a gentle word of sympathy, of excusing leniency from Mildred—as now.

But these appeals, especially when in the form of a defence of Mr. Norton, never won a return. Mildred met them with all the discouragement of silent reserve and coldness, or at best a blank neutrality. At first these cold receptions were purely the show of offended fastidiousness ; but lately, a carking consciousness of a no longer

whole condition of her own moral habits made her even less disposed to gentleness. In her aunt's case she saw an exaggerated precedent for her own, and the sight affrighted and hardened her.

Mrs. Norton sighed at the non-response as she had sighed fifty times before, and returned to the subject of her new worry, smoothing her gloves across her pretty muslin lap.

"Mr. Norton said they were getting on together very well—he and Mr. Heathcote, you know. Mr. Heathcote seemed rather quiet and disinclined to talk, 'in the dumps,' as Mr. Norton calls it, but really not strange, when all at once"—Mrs. Norton lowered her voice to the most impressive emphasis—"he introduced his son's name."

"Is it possible? I thought the legend was he had quite forgotten that he had ever had a son. No wonder Mr. Norton was disturbed. Mr. Heathcote should really show more consideration for people's nerves." Mildred smiled serenely at her aunt.

"Mildred, I wonder if there is anything you would not make a jest about?" said Mrs. Norton, with the natural irritation of one whose startling announcement has fallen mortifyingly flat.

"Forgive me, auntie dear. I am only dissembling. In reality, I am thrilled. Go on. What astounding statement was Mr. Heathcote guilty of next? Did he say he had made the discovery of an unsuspected remnant of fatherly affection—a little scrap that had managed to escape the ravages of their bitter quarrels? I am prepared for anything."

"He said he was thinking of having his son back again."

Mildred said nothing. She was brushing her hair, and appeared absorbed in watching the silky dusky locks.

"Isn't it awful?" said Mrs. Norton.

"Is there such danger of young Mr. Heathcote's corrupting the neighbourhood?"

"Mildred!" her aunt rose. "Any one else would see the significance of such an

intention, and the whole provokingness of the uncertainty, but——”

“But I am too innocent and ingenuous,” said the girl, with bitter mockery. “I am rejoicing with unalloyed pleasure at the triumph of paternal and filial love over misunderstandings and evil passions. It is a most elevating and edifying spectacle. You should be full of enthusiastic admiration too, auntie.”

“I am not without feeling for you in the matter, you see,” said her aunt reproachfully, giving a caressing stroke to the wavy stream over Mildred’s shoulders.

Mildred jerked herself away as if she had been stung, and faced her aunt with an indignant flash in her eyes.

“My dear!” bewildered. “I did not mean to offend you!”

“As Mr. Norton has come back, I suppose we must have the nuisance of dressing and dinner?” said Mildred, a tremble in the would-be nonchalant tones.

“Yes, and I must hurry away to dress—we are dreadfully late.” And Mrs. Norton

Left the room in a flutter of gay muslin and lace, once more perplexed by her niece's strangeness. She could not understand that shrinking from a mere allusion to Lewis Ingram's "infatuation;" she could not see the reasonableness of a refusal to discuss frankly so natural a subject for frank anxiety as his worldly prospects. "I don't see why she should be so reserved with me," thought Mrs. Norton, over her hasty toilet. "It isn't as if there was any secrecy or mystery about the affair."

She would have been even more perplexed had she seen Mildred cover her face with her hands as soon as she was left alone, and stand thus for some moments, outwardly still, but tingling from head to foot in an ecstasy of bitter shame and mortification. The revulsion was too cruel, too maddening. The immediate presentation of the familiar, cold, scheming, worldly impulses came with a jarring shock upon the gentler, sweeter thoughts she had been musing over.

Where were they now? Startled,

frightened away like strangers and aliens at the return of the old rightful inmates of a dwelling. She had a half-frenzied sense of having been duped and deluded into committing herself, and with it was an angry resentment against Mr. Heathcote, and even against Lewis, and the greatest scorn at her own weakness. What had she done? what folly had she allowed herself idly to drift into? what crazy fancy had beguiled her for that one foolish, worse than foolish moment? To bribe her conscience to acquiescence in what she knew to be wrong, she had tried to force herself into the belief that she cared for Lewis Ingram—and now she was surely entangled, and—for what?

CHAPTER IV.

“A LITTLE WHILE YOU HAVE BEEN GLAD.”

LEWIS did not return at once to Grove House. He had no thought of such things as time and dinner when he parted from Mildred at the door. He walked down to the beach, instinctively seeking solitude in the open air. A little boat lay at the water's edge; he stepped into it and pushed himself off, quite forgetful of the usual word of explanation to the boat's owner, Bill.

That worthy was seated on the edge of another boat, smoking his pipe at what he believed to be the end of his day's business. He kept quite still, perhaps from sheer surprise at this harsh noti-

fication of the prolonging of his hours of duty, and watched the boat taken from under his "very eyes," with a masterly inactivity that might have been envied by any government at a critical juncture. His mind had already set to work upon some intricate calculations as to the charge to be made under these unusual, not to say suspicious circumstances. If for a boat taken out within the usual hours, and taken out with the usual preliminaries and formalities, he charged so much an hour, how much was he to charge in the present case, allowing for all the wear and tear of anxiety to the owner? This was a problem to puzzle a clearer and more practised brain than Bill's—to him it was a gigantic intellectual labour, and "took out of him" more than the whole work of any ordinary day. For he had the decaying remains of a conscience in financial matters, and it is that inconvenient possession which robs transactions of the simplicity so dear to the grasping mind. If he followed nature's impulse,

and "piled it on" with the warmth of anger rather than with the discretion of honesty, he might overreach himself, and drive away further custom from those small fortunes to boat owners, the Grove House and the Norton people; for, however mad a man might be, and the suspicion of Ingram's madness had not failed to present itself at once, Bill's experience had taught him that he generally preserved the coolness, what might be termed in fact the chilliness, of sanity in money matters. If, on the other hand, he lost an opportunity, he should regret to his dying day having done himself so little justice.

Unconscious of these harassed meditations on the sands, Lewis rowed himself out to the open sea, dipping in the oars with the gentlest and dreamiest impulse, just enough to make the boat move over the smooth water. As soon as the grey sea was widely around him, he rested on his oars and gave himself up to brooding over the rapture thrilling all his heart and

pulses. He had never known such an experience as this ecstasy of felicity in its first hour. He had read hope in Mildred's eyes in the sunny light that evening—hope for his dear glad love, a promise of her love. That look had set his heart singing for joy. That she, Mildred, should love him! Mildred, fair, slim, stately Mildred, who fascinated and enthralled him—that at last, at last, at last! her proud dark eyes should fall before his, her pure cold cheek turn rosy for him! At last! He looked round at the soft grey waters and lifted his face to the clear sky with the grave look of gladness noticed by Mildred. How fair, how beautiful all was! How sweet and good and glorious life was! He did not doubt his bliss—he believed in her too thoroughly for a doubt; he was not impatient to be with her again; the exquisite content of gladness filled his heart; he desired nothing better than to make acquaintance with it out there, alone in the tender evening between the soft

wide sea and the soft wide sky. The little boat moved dreamily on the water, which heaved like some giant breast in quiet slumber. One by one the stars shone faintly out, the peace and silence were divine.

Presently Lewis roused himself with a sigh of happiness and dipped in an oar to turn the boat round. The habit of mundane routine affects even a young man in his love dream, and something, perhaps the lights which gleamed in quick succession from the windows of the long line of houses on the banks, reminded him of the necessity of returning. He rowed quickly back. A broad dark figure stepped down to the water's edge to receive him. Bill cleared his throat and prepared to plunge into an elaborate relation of reasons, for conscience had been silenced by the overpowering considerations of fatigue and irritability, and he had determined that the exorbitance of his charge should be worthy of him. The first husky murmur had hardly issued from

his lips when Ingram slipped something into his hand.

"It's a beautiful evening, Bill," said he, with a lightheartedness that seemed to hold a laugh in it. "Good-night!"

"Good night, sir," quite cheerily, as if Bill had enjoyed the evening as much as the young man. The weight of the coin in his hand had had a magic effect. "It's just as well," soliloquised he, "to trust to a man's feelings. It's better than so much reckonin'. A beautiful evenin', is it? Well, if a man chooses to pay handsome for his beautiful evenin', I'm not goin' to dispute his words."

Through the dusk went Lewis, treading as if on air. As he passed the Nortons' he glanced up at the windows with an agitation of his pulses and a singing of his heart. "She is there, she is there!" he thought.

At the door of Grove House he stopped for another look at the sweet dim outside—no other night-scene surely had looked so fair, and still, and peaceful. With a

half sigh at leaving it, he entered the lighted hall behind.

Gussy turned round from the foot of the stairs as he came in. The candle in her little hand threw a soft light over her white dress and rosy face, and dazzled the sleepy blue eyes.

"Why, Lewis, where have you been? Papa has been asking for you."

"Where is Mr. Heathcote?" asked Lewis, hanging up his cap.

"In the drawing-room. What a pity you didn't come home to dinner. I was at the Nortons', and papa was all alone, and I'm afraid he's a little cross about it. You must soothe him over—you can always do that. Good night!" And Gussy blew a light kiss to him, bubbled over into a peal of silver laughter, and vanished upstairs.

Lewis went into the lamp-lit drawing-room. In the window at the farther end, which was still wide open, stood Mr. Heathcote, looking out. On Lewis's entrance he crashed down the window and faced round.

"I'm sorry to be so late, sir," said the young man; and though he spoke with polite regret, he could not repress the ring of joyousness in his voice. "Gussy says you want me—I'm sorry I have kept you waiting. To tell the truth, I forgot all about dinner," with an embarrassed little laugh.

Mr. Heathcote slowly advanced to the middle of the room. "This is very serious," he remarked sarcastically. "Do you ever remember doing such a thing before?"

Lewis laughed again.

"You must be content with a cold supper——"

Ingram protested that he wanted nothing—he was not hungry.

The banker raised his eyebrows with an air of mockery; then abruptly—"Pooh, nonsense! I can't talk to a fasting man. Make them bring you something to the dining-room. Take your time. I'm in no particular hurry."

While Lewis was eating a hasty meal in

good-natured obedience to this peremptory order, Mr. Heathcote paced up and down the room in deep thought, his hands behind him, his brows knitted, and his eyes bent on the floor. He had questioned Gussy skilfully and closely before sending her off to bed, and from her ready chatter had learned that Lewis and Miss Loraine were a good deal together that afternoon and evening, and part of the time alone. The dreamy rapture of Ingram's expression had caught his notice at once. Was it possible that Lewis had so far disregarded his caution before starting as to propose? His anger flamed hotly at the mere idea. Gussy, his little Gussy, his darling, was to be slighted, his own wishes were to be set aside, and he was counted upon to act according to the expectations of others. Unfortunately, nothing roused his temper and opposition so much as to have his actions taken as a matter of course—it was only less presumptuous than for any one to act for him.

The fact that he had himself given

ample cause for general belief in Lewis's expectations, was an aggravation, rather than a palliation of the offence contained in people's belief. What business had any one to draw conclusions concerning his conduct? He had never read "Caliban upon Setebos," but his own jealousy of independent action was not unlike Caliban's idea of the jealousy of Setebos—"Doth as he likes, or wherefore Lord?"

Mr. Heathcote's present desire was an ardent one to "teach the reasoning couple what must means"—for "reasoning couple," read his acquaintances in general and Mr. Norton in particular. He was almost savagely tenacious of his right to do what he would with his own, and he resented claims upon him. One, and perhaps not the least of the reasons why he had put Lewis over his own son's head, was that Lewis had no demand upon him. It suited his humour better to give charity from pure free-will than to satisfy avowed claims. He preferred the absolute dependence of a *protégé* to the securer and

more equal relations of father and son ; more especially when, as in the case of his own son, a private fortune inherited from his mother added to his just rights the further offence of independence of his father.

His despotism appeased, he could be generous enough—not only in what he gave but in the manner of his giving—as was proved by the matter-of-course way in which Lewis had accepted his bounty from the first, growing into the niche, so richly provided for him as if it were his natural place. This was exactly as Mr. Heathcote would have chosen to have it—he was well pleased at the testimony, as it might be called, to the wholeness and thoroughness of his benevolence towards his favourite. A fixed attitude of grateful veneration on his *protégé's* part, repeated thanks and acknowledgments, would have disgusted and estranged him. Lewis's ingenuous faith in fortune suited him perfectly, quite apart from the real affection he had for the young man.

But it was unpardonable to build upon his favour to the extreme of counting upon a son's inheritance. Because he had done so much, was it to be concluded he must do so much more? Must! Such presumption exasperated him quite as much as the reasoning of the squirrel and urchin exasperated Caliban. This way did *not* please the autocratic banker. It roused all his contradictoriness; and, although he was far from acknowledging that it was so, it in some degree stirred his slumbering conscience towards his son. Mr. Heathcote did not recognize any prickings of conscience in his present determination to "take it out of mad Norton," not being given to delicate unravelling of the tangled network of motives; but by some curious irony his anger against the audacity of his acquaintances, who chose to expect him to disinherit his banished son, excited towards the exile some faint feeling of compunction. To do him justice, the unpleasant sensation was not altogether a stranger to his paternal heart. During

a long illness in the winter he had thought very seriously about that quarrel of seven years ago, and at the times of greatest exhaustion and depression had gone so far as to admit to himself that perhaps after all there might have been faults on both sides. It is a great step for a man to acknowledge a possibility of having been in fault, but his pride must be harder and more stubborn than even human pride can surely be if a day or two's close quarters with Death do not pull it an inch or two nearer the dust.

Mr. Heathcote brought from the grim struggle a desire to leave the world with no glaring injustice on his soul towards his son. Unhappily, the growth of another claim fostered by himself presented a difficulty. Then he hit upon the scheme of a marriage between his *protégé* and his daughter, which seemed satisfactory in every way. Gussy would be a well-dowered bride; a man had no right to complain if he shared her fortune and got a charming wife into the bargain. The

arrangement was so admirable and fair ; that any one could fail to see the perfection of its symmetry was inconceivable ; that one of the persons so arranged for should prove intractable was enraging. It must be confessed it is annoying to a man not to be able to put things straight as soon as he has graciously decided to do so.

The failure of Ingram's support in the carrying out of the plan stirred up in Mr. Heathcote's mind the ungenerous emotions that had only been latent. It appeared to him shocking that one for whom he had done everything should hesitate to oblige him in so trivial a matter—should refuse, as it were, a mere courteous acknowledgment of benefits received.

He was deeply sensible of the awkwardness and delicacy of the position, and this did not serve to compose his feelings towards Lewis.

The young man's very unconsciousness of offence was irritating—he should at least show some readiness to have a quarrel picked with him.

Altogether the banker's frame of mind while he waited was far from enviable. Everything was wrong—Lewis's forgetfulness of time ; his blissful oblivion of the duty of giving his society at dinner ; his good-humoured obedience now.

"Any one else would have done without a meal rather than keep me waiting," fumed Mr. Heathcote, with all the wilful unreasonableness of ill-temper.

He was not kept waiting long, however. At the end of ten minutes the dining-room door opened, and a firm, elastic step crossed the tiled hall. Mr. Heathcote seated himself and opened a book. He looked up from it with something like a growl as Lewis entered.

"There was no such terrible hurry ; I didn't wish to prevent you from eating your food like a Christian."

"Oh, I wanted little enough ; I wasn't hungry," replied Lewis cheerfully.

"Thinks I'm to be soothed like a fractious child," fretted his patron inwardly, as he pointed imperatively to a chair near

the table on which the lamp stood. Seated there, Lewis was in full light, and Mr. Heathcote gave him a searching inspection. The young man had thrown himself sideways on the chair, leaning an arm upon the back and his cheek on his hand. His handsome face was slightly flushed and still illumined by its new gladness; he was looking down idly, dreamily, but at the pause he glanced up expectantly, with a radiant happiness shining out of the frank clear eyes. That look gave a shock of reanimation, so to speak, to the banker's fondness and delight in him; he had been, nay, was, very fond and very proud of the good-looking fellow lounging before him with such graceful carelessness. Regret and compunction touched his heart. He did not want to pain him; it was no pleasure to him to baulk the lad's wishes; it was extremely provoking that the lad's own folly should cause unpleasantness between them.

"Lewis, my dear boy," he exclaimed, "I wish you would be reasonable!" He

spoke impulsively, with regret and yet with some impatience too.

Lewis's eyes widened a little. "What is the matter, sir?"

"Oh, my dear fellow, don't come the unconscious and innocent style of thing! Your memory must be as good as mine. Don't you remember what I said to you this afternoon before you started on this expedition—which seems, by the way, to have left you somewhere in the clouds?"

"Yes," said Lewis, reddening slightly at this allusion. He heaved a deep sigh—foreseeing an unpleasant half-hour, and wishing it could have been put off at least till next day. He wanted only to dream over his happiness to-night.

Mr. Heathcote's eyes and ears were quick, and the sigh did not pass unnoticed.

"I am sorry to make any demands upon your attention," he said in his driest tone.

"You must blame the distressing limitations of human faculties; unfortunately some talk is necessary between two of our species if we wish to understand each

other. And from your behaviour this afternoon and evening I fear that you by no means do understand me."

"What is it you wish me to understand, sir?"

"You remember what I said to you this afternoon?"

"Perfectly." Ingram's lips tightened a little.

"Are you sure? I gave you a hint of advice; did you profit by it to the extent of making any difference in your manner to—the lady you wot of?"

"No," said Lewis, looking straight across at him. "What difference can I or should I make?"

"Really, Lewis," pushing his chair back a little with a jerk, "for a person endowed with the average complement of wit, you talk like a fool."

"That may be; but I do not understand what difference I could make," speaking hurriedly. "I have no right to—make any difference as you term it. I should be acting dishonourably if I did."

"Dishonourably!" echoing the word in a loud voice. "Pray, sir," he began impetuously; then broke off with the rapid question: "Have you, in spite of what I said, spoken this afternoon?"

"No—that is——"

"Ah!" sharply. "Have you then, at any time, in so many words asked her to be your wife?"

This blunt catechism made Lewis writhe. His voice was hardly audible as he again muttered, "No," adding, "But——"

"But!" broke in the other roughly. 'What does 'But' mean? Does it mean that if you did speak you are confident of——"

Lewis started in his chair, involuntarily putting out his hand to check these profanely plain words.

Mr. Heathcote uttered an inarticulate ejaculation of impatience. "'Pon my word, there's no choosing one's words to please you! Leave sentiment *now*—haven't you indulged freely enough in it to-day?—and come to business like

a sensible fellow. What is the proper phrase to use? I'm quite out of practice in these delicate matters! Certain? sure? convinced?—no, no, too confident, aren't they? We're nothing if not becomingly modest! Hopeful—that's it—hope with trembling—that's the proper romantic coupling of terms. Come, the most bashful lover could not object to that—Are you, then, tremblingly hopeful, Lewis? bending forward with a keen, mocking glance.

Across the young man's troubled face flashed a moment's tender light, half joyfully, half proud. He raised his head, but the banker made an authoritative gesture for him to be silent, at the same time sinking back in his chair. There was a pause. Mr. Heathcote shaded his eyes with his hand, holding himself together as it were in a struggle of fierce anger, of wounded pride, and of something very like sudden hatred towards this man, for his tacit rejection of the great favour tacitly offered to him. That look had stung Mr. Heathcote; he

vowed that he would darken its light, that he would paralyze the arm holding the cup of bliss so that no more than the first drop already tasted should be drunk. He had a spell to bring contumacy to its knees if ever a man had. His pang of suffering was quickly succeeded by a vindictive exultation in his power. Compunction and weakness were stifled. He removed his hand and straightened himself in his chair. His voice was bitinglly bitter, and a little tremulous and hoarse with repressed passion.

"I congratulate you, Ingram. Don't think me officious if I venture to suggest to you a test, a sure test, of your mistress's truth and affection. Every lover worth the name longs to be convinced beyond dispute that he is loved for himself and for no accident of circumstance or fortune. It is a natural desire. But how seldom can it be realized with any satisfaction! You are peculiarly fortunate in being able to prove your lady's motives and her affection."

He rose, insisting by a gesture on being heard out, for Lewis had got upon his feet with a quick movement of surprise and bewilderment.

"Go to her," exclaimed Mr. Heathcote, with that imperious gesture urging silence and attention, "and offer your hand and heart. Tell her the usual rigmarole about the latter's wealth, its devotion and adoration, etc., etc., but add that your *hand* is empty, that your prospects are vague. Discourse of unlimited waiting, to be rewarded, perhaps, in the dim future, with love in a cottage. In short, drop a hint that your expectations are by no means as certain as has been imagined, and see the result."

The two men faced each other in a breathless pause. The elder wore a look of excited defiance, for the change in the younger's face was not easy to see unshaken. Angry as Mr. Heathcote was, it needed some bracing of his nerves to watch the sick collapse of hope to startled dismay. The youth left the handsome

face; the lines lost elasticity, and became drawn and haggard; the lips, from which the happy smile was struck as by a blow, were white, and dry, and quivering. Lewis looked back into the other's eyes with a confused, inquiring expression, as if he would ask whether or no this was grim earnest, or almost grimmer jest.

"The test is perfect. Take my advice; apply it," urged Mr. Heathcote.

"But—I have no doubts," murmured Lewis, in a curious mechanical voice.

A slight laugh was the answer. "Lucky man! But don't rest in a fool's paradise; you may regret it later."

"I cannot insult her," said Lewis, in the same confused way.

"Insult her?"

"To think for a moment of—of—any test, as you call it, would be an insult."

"Not at all; you mistake. It is a pure matter of business. You must arrive at the practical detail stage before long. You can't remain in the clouds. There are the young lady's guardians to be

reckoned with. You spoke of acting dishonourably a little while ago. Let me tell you there is more than one way of doing so—a judicious change of manner, preparatory to withdrawing your attentions, not being perhaps the worst. You shrink from applying that test—evidently, then, you dread the result.”

Lewis's white lips trembled. He tried to speak, failed, and renewed the attempt—“You mean that you—require me to say that?”

“I think it would be better, wiser, and more honourable,” said Mr. Heathcote deliberately steeling himself against the pained wonder in Lewis's eyes. There was something almost piteous in their utter blank dismay.

“Why should you hesitate? Why should you be so disturbed at the idea? You have no doubts, you say,” he said, goaded into taunting by his own irritation at the sight of pain.

“It is not that,” muttered Lewis. He turned half away, instinctively avoiding

the changed eyes of the man who had been so good to him, putting out one hand as if to steady himself; it struck his chair, and he grasped the back and leaned heavily upon it.

"If," said Mr. Heathcote slowly, "if her answer is what you, with your elevated faith in her, are so confident of receiving, you may rest assured, Ingram, that I shall put no obstacle in the way of your happiness."

"It is not that," repeated Lewis brokenly. "It simply amounts to this—it puts an end altogether to—anything. I ought not to speak to her at all—I have no right to go near her, if I am to say that—that I have nothing."

It was not perhaps a dignified or spirited speech, and of that he was sharply conscious; there was even an involuntary ring of appeal and reproach in the tone, of which he was as conscious. But the thought of his love robbed him of all pride; the suggested loss was too sudden and too terrible; he felt he could be abject to this

man in whose power was his happiness. Aghast and bewildered as he was at the wreck of his prospects, stupefied at the bitterness of his patron's tone and manner and the injustice of his treatment, and cruelly humiliated at this stern realizing of his dependence, the old habit of deference was still strong upon him, while the new dependence of love was stronger still and dissolved all spirit for the moment.


"Well?" said Mr. Heathcote, coming a step nearer, and looking straight at him.

Lewis looked back inquiringly.

"*Have* you anything? What were you thinking of offering before?"

The blood rushed to Lewis's face. He drew back a step or two as if the other had struck him. Shame and anger, all the more passionate because of the accompanying bitter rush of self-contempt at his momentary weakness and want of spirit, swelled his heart and set his pulses beating wildly.

"You do well to remind me of my position, sir!"



"Certainly, if it is necessary!" said Mr. Heathcote quickly and sternly.

"Why did you not do so before?" cried Lewis. "You have played with me and fooled me! You have let me go into people's houses in a false position! You have let me win friends on false pretences! Is it *my* fault that every one is deceived about me and my prospects?"

"Reproaches!" exclaimed Mr. Heathcote, with flashing eyes. "Young man, gently, gently! Don't be so violent; I can't stand much excitement yet. I'm beginning to feel that I have already had as much as is good for me."

As he spoke he went back to his chair, and sat with his hand on his heart for a moment or two, breathing pantingly. His head was bent down, and Lewis, thinking himself unobserved, put up his hands and pressed them to his face with a wild gesture of *abandon*. It was as much as he could do to repress a groan in that first anguish and despair.

"Reproaches come well from you to me.

Have you any more civil speeches in ~~this~~ strain?" inquired Mr. Heathcote ~~pre-~~sently.

There was no answer.

"I particularly admire that one abo~~ut~~ the playing with you; it shows an appreci~~ation~~ of what I have done for you whic~~h~~ is very gratifying. In what way have I played with you, pray? How have I fooled you? Surely what I have done~~me~~ has been real enough and straightforwar~~d~~ enough in all conscience! Am I to be~~be~~ answerable for the assumptions of others? Is a man responsible for every insan~~e~~ expectation of his circle of acquaintances? May he not have the luxury of a quarrel~~l~~ with his son without being obliged to go~~o~~ the length of cutting him off with a sh~~ill~~ing? Good Heavens! I should hope so~~o~~! and I will show them so! No one know~~ws~~ what I shall do with my own; no one has a right to know, and no one *shall* know un~~til~~ I choose. I will drive Norton crazy with uncertainty and complete the work Nature has left more than half done. It will be a

delicious comedy!" He threw back his head and laughed unrestrainedly. "If you had any humour, Ingram, you would be able to enjoy it with me; but in your present tragic state of mind you will only be an actor. You will miss a great deal. However, I don't think I shall be without a fellow spectator."

These remarks startled Lewis with a chill, but perfectly vague, suspicion.

"What do you mean?" he asked involuntarily.

"Oh, the details are not quite matured. You shall hear to-morrow. After a night's rest you will be cooler, and, I trust, more rational. You will have had time to reflect. You will, maybe, have gained a glimmering of the hard truth that romance and highflown sentiment are cruelly in the way of a man if he wants to get on in this world. I had my turn, and I found it so. Of course, the experience is disagreeable—so many experiences are—but there are some I can imagine infinitely more disagreeable. For instance, the want of anything to sup-

port experiences upon—that appeals irresistibly to my conceptions of the unpleasant. Relatively, a fit of love-sickness is a mere bagatelle. You said something about being deceived in regard to your prospects: allow me to tell you that the making or marring of your prospects lies in your own hands. Is it too much to ask you to meet me half-way? to expect some yielding of your will to mine in our relative positions? Don't you think, after all, that I have some title to consideration on your part? You force me to remind you of things I would rather were left unmentioned between us."

"You have every right to what you say," answered Lewis respectfully. "I know and feel what you have done for me, sir—and if there was any way in which I could show my sense of gratitude——"

A queer smile twitched the banker's lips. "Any way except the one way. I see. It is generally so."

"It is too much for any man to expect to dispose of another's life in that way," cried Lewis with agitation. "Is it just

to exact the sacrifice of his whole happiness ? to require him to give up the thing that gives value to his life ? "

" Those things pass," said Mr. Heathcote coldly. " You are suffering from your first love malady ; you are young, and you think the present permanent. It is *not* so—very far from it, indeed—therefore, I am not exacting this vast and life-long sacrifice from you. The only thing that does give satisfactory value to life is—a sure balance at your banker's. I don't speak from professional pride, I assure you, although I am a banker!" he added, laughing with that enjoyment only felt by a man in his own jokes. Then with a sudden change : " But the truth is you are getting confused on the subject. I merely remind you that neither to you nor to others, including Mr. and Mrs. Norton, have I given any hint of my intentions respecting my heir. Let this suggestion be conveyed to them and you will be spared any decision. *They* will take the initiative."

A conflict of feeling passed over Lewis's downcast face. When he raised his eyes, there was a strange light in them.

"Do you need me any longer just now?" he said, in a tone studiously controlled and quiet.

"No," cried Mr. Heathcote.

"Then I think I will go to bed." Lewis walked to the door. "Good-night, sir."

"Good-night," came curtly, after an instant's hesitation.

Lewis left the room, feeling that he could bear no more just then. He stumbled upstairs with almost a physical sense of sick giddiness. His mind was confused and bewildered—his theories had received a shock which had thrown them into the wildest chaos. Life had been always such a pleasant and easy business; this rude starting up of contradictions and difficulties, this harsh thrusting into view of disagreeables and restrictions, struck him as being a huge unjust mistake.

For the first time in his life he passed a sleepless night. He could not sleep; he

could not think coherently; he only felt with a dull persistent dread and misery that all at once a terrible and complete veto was put upon his happiness. He would not be able to gain the love he had for one brief hour imagined within his grasp. And before the prospect of the dreary emptiness left, his heart fainted within him with apprehension at the dread experience of that hitherto unknown mystery—suffering.

CHAPTER V.

"WITHIN HOPELESS SIGHT OF HOPE."

"I AM going to take a holiday to-day," observed Mr. Heathcote, at breakfast next morning.

"You, papa?" asked Gussy, opening her blue eyes. "Aren't you afraid the bank will run away?"

"No impertinence, young lady. Lewis will take care of the bank for once."

"Oh, Lewis, what a responsibility! No wonder you look crushed already," said Gussy, with one of her rippling laughs. "Do you think, dear boy, that another cup of coffee will help to sustain you under the burden? Pass your cup, you poor unfortunate!"

Mr. Heathcote shot a swift keen glance at the young man, and noticed the depression remarked upon so lightly by Gussy. "He feels the rein," thought he, not without satisfaction.

"There won't be much for you to do, Lewis," he said. "Come back to luncheon."

"Oh, he *must* come back to luncheon," cried Gussy. "We want him. We are going for another row. It is all arranged.

Don't know what Mildred will do if her devoted knight is not in attendance."

Lewis turned hastily with a look of anger—lost upon her, however, as she was engaged in buttering a strip of toast. But Mr. Heathcote saw the look, and determined to punish it.

"Miss Loraine must occasionally have her disappointments, I suppose, like other mortals," he observed stiffly.

"But Lewis *mustn't* disappoint us," said Gussy imperiously. "Lewis, you will come back for luncheon?"

"He *is* to come back for luncheon," said

her father. "But for once Miss Loraine **must** yield her convenience to mine. I want him."

Gussy raised her eyebrows and shrugged her shoulders, with a petulant resignation peculiar to herself.

Lewis rose. "I think it is time **I** started. Have you any commissions for me, sir?" in a constrained manner.

"Yes—one," was the prompt reply. "I have a note for you to leave at Wood's. I made an appointment with him for this morning; but as I'm not going to town he must come here." He watched Lewis narrowly as he spoke; then, pointing to a writing-table, added, "The note is there. Don't forget it."

Lewis walked to the table and took up the note.

"There are Mrs. Norton and Mildred," exclaimed Gussy. "They are going to the station," rushing to the window.

Mr. Heathcote laughed grimly. "Promp'ton my honour! I suppose they know your week's holiday ended yesterday?" aside to Ingram.

"Oh, I remember!" cried Gussy, unconscious of by-play. "Mrs. Norton said last night that she would be obliged to go to town to-day."

"She has a keen sense of duty," said Mr. Heathcote gravely. "Miss Loraine's doubtless needed as escort. Don't let us detain you, Ingram. 'The morning our has gold in its mouth' seems to be peculiarly apt saying on this occasion. Don't you think so?"

But Lewis did not wait to reply.

Gussy sang out a blithe "Good-bye" as he passed the window, and then she came to the middle of the room and surveyed her father, her blonde head on one side.

"Well, Rosebud?" he said, smiling absently.

"You seem rather cross this morning, Papa," she said, giving the information with charming frankness.

"Do I? Not with you, my darling, at least."

"Why no! of *course* not! Why do you

tease poor Lewis so about his little affair of the heart ? ”

“ Because a young man suffering from a little affair of the heart is in a namby-pamby condition, and requires a wholesome tonic,” was the rejoinder, somewhat curtly given. The question showed Gussy too well acquainted with Lewis’s affection for Miss Loraine ; and this acquaintance was another difficulty in the swift carrying out of that desirable arrangement—a man might have a greater recommendation in the eyes of his destined wife than a love affair carried on before her.

Gussy’s bright childlike eyes dwelt on him with redoubled curiosity.

“ I should fancy, papa, that *you* have never been in need of that sort of tonic.”

“ Should you indeed, little Inquisitive ? ”

“ I can’t imagine *you* in a namby-pamby condition,” shaking her head.

“ I don’t look a likely subject for it, do I ? ” rather sadly.

“ Not the least bit in the world ! But of course, you weren’t always as you are

now, were you?" reflectively. "You must have been young once——"

"Incredible as it seems," murmured her father, his amusement at her chatter for once largely mingled with pain.

"And of course you *did* fall in love then, because of mamma," summed up Gussy, executing a pirouette in triumph at the brilliancy of this discovery.

When she faced her father's chair again, it was empty, and Mr. Heathcote was half way to the door. "Papa!" she cried, puzzled by this abrupt withdrawal of his fond attention, and flying to him. She put her hands round his arm in her pretty affectionate way. "I'm like mamma, am I not, dear?" said she, coaxing for a loving compliment, for it was no new thing for her to play the coquette with her father. Mr. Heathcote looked down as if reluctantly at the bright face raised to his. For once the pretty tints and soft curves, the dimples, the fresh lips and gay unclouded eyes, failed to win the tender admiration Gussy knew so well. He half drew away

his arm, in fact; then a curious expression flashed into his eyes. "No," he said laughing unkindly, "you are like me, Gussy—when I was young, of course. Rupert takes after his mother." He laughed again, enjoying her surprise, brushed her cheek with a light kiss, and left the room.

Gussy stood still in sheer amazement.

"Well," said she at length, with slow emphasis, "I *never* knew papa so strange in fact so utterly remarkable before! He was not at all nice. And why did he mention Rupert? I thought we had *all* forgotten *Rupert*."

Her father walked quickly to his private room and shut himself in. Gussy's small little hand had dealt him a thrust which pierced right through to his heart, and the first sharpness of the pang thus answered, it was perhaps not strange that he should resent the thrust as bitterly as if it were an intentional one.

"Those things pass," he had said harshly to Lewis; and now a face not unlike Lewis's own—a vivacious, handsome face, quick

different from Gussy's prettiness of child-like tints and contours—flashed into vivid remembrance, as if to contradict his own assertion. It was the face of Lewis's mother—Mr. Heathcote's first and only love. Poverty on both sides, with ambition superadded on his, had kept them apart ; and he had married his senior partner's daughter,, Margaret Osborne. Yet in all the nineteen years of his wedded life he had never forgotten his love, and never forgiven his wife for her possession of those worldly advantages denied her rival. He had married to advance himself in life ; and his marriage had satisfied abundantly every worldly demand. But he was not generous, he could not receive with magnanimity. Always present and conscious was a grudge against the woman whose fortune had enriched him and whose connections aided his ambition. The grudge was twofold : for her he had sacrificed his love ; to her he owed his prosperity. Nor was it possible for him to act a tender part. He made but a cold indifferent husband ; and poor

Mrs. Heathcote, who had so innocentl~~y~~ offended the man she loved, who w~~as~~ denied any interest in his concerns, and stunted of the pleasure she might have ha~~ad~~ in knowledge of the help she had give~~n~~ him, suffered a long martyrdom of slighte~~d~~ affection and rejected sympathy.

The uncheered, uncherished years real~~l~~y killed her. Had it not been for her ch~~il~~-dren, for the love and worship of her son and the devotion of her sister, her broken heart would have ceased to ache year~~s~~ sooner than it did; the "decline," which was the satisfactory physical operation, would have come to a decidedly abrupt~~er~~ close. Grant no kindness to a loving human heart, and the cords of life are quickly worn through.

Mr. Heathcote knew little, perhaps nothing, of this. The denial of his own love had hardened his heart, and he had done the best he could to close it against any softness of feeling. He did not imagine that the wan, delicate woman, fading visibly to all eyes but his own, was

simply starved for a crumb of kindness; he did not think about her, that was all. And perhaps it was as well that he was unconscious, for embittered as he was by his own unsatisfied affection, he was not likely to be tender to her had he suspected that she was in truth pining for tenderness. He could not forget her innocent sins; even her death did not absolve her from them.

But it was not her pathetic image that came back so vividly now—it was not the remembrance of her that lay sweet and warm and tender beneath the thick crust of worldliness and hardness. It was the recollection of his dead love. He needed no picture to recall her: his memory gave him clear and faithful, picture after picture of the beloved, changeful face, scene after scene from the old sweet days, glorified by the light of youth and hope and love; and with them even wafts of the old golden sunny atmosphere. Lewis was like his mother, and possessed much of the same charm and attractiveness. For her sake he had been loved and cherished.

But Mr. Heathcote did not yield to the indulgence of retrospection : he closed the door of that sacred chamber of his heart with violence, and turned impatiently to the present. "Those things pass," he had said ; those things had to pass, he amended relentlessly. Perhaps it was strange that this recollection of his old romance and reviving of his own past suffering did not rouse in him compunction for Lewis, his dead love's son, his own dear charge for so long. But it had, on the contrary, a quite different effect. Suffering does not always soften the sympathies towards suffering — a man's very impatience of pain will sometimes harden him against pity. He is suffering, why should not others suffer ? And Mr. Heathcote hated the remembrance of his former anguish ; he was still angry at the untowardness of his fate. Had he not been obliged to forego the "charm of life" ? Why then should Lewis expect to fare any better ? Besides, the habits of prosperity and authority had fostered his will to arrogance. A little sentimental regret was

powerless to keep him from carrying out any scheme.

He sat down to his desk and proceeded to write two letters with a gratifying consciousness of his power to bring Lewis to reason. He believed he had only to turn the screw of opposition tightly enough to obtain his terms, sublimely oblivious of any likelihood of putting too great a strain upon the young man's endurance. His opinion of Lewis's spirit after last evening was in fact somewhat low: a little contemptuously he thought he could play upon the lad's dependence as he chose. Why not? Lewis would have to give in—he, so to speak, belonged to his patron. There was no danger of his pride taking alarm so far as to goad him into action—a little fuming and chafing there might be—but what could he do if he refused his patron's countenance? Mr. Heathcote believed in the security of the chains binding his young *protégé* to him, having indeed no conception of any other motives for sane human action except those of self-interest. In

homely phrase he said to himself, "No—
 he knows where his bread's well buttered,
 and he'll have a tolerably shrewd inkling
 of the difficulty of getting it buttered else—
 where if he takes the huff with me. Lewis
 is a dear, charming fellow, but he is not
 made of stern, of even fairly substantial
 stuff. He'd make a mess of it if he
 attempted any standing alone."

Meanwhile, Lewis had nearly reached
 the station. The miserable, stunned,
 bewildered feeling still oppressed him.
 His faculties were absorbed in anticipation
 of the meeting with Mildred, and in trying
 to control his shaken nerves to at least a
 outward appearance of composure. He
 dreaded the next look at her face—
 wished that she was not there—at the
 station, to be confronted in a few minutes.
 He walked draggingly to gain more time
 for preparation for the ordeal, to leave
 a little time as might be before the train
 started—moments which only yesterday
 would have been so precious, so eagerly
 caught at. He had an actual sensation

of shame, as if he were an exposed impostor. It seemed to him that her proud indifferent eyes would see at once the disgrace that had fallen upon him. He shrank from their clear gaze; strange to say, he did not imagine seeing them softened and shy as he had seen them yesterday, the last time they had looked upon him. Was it because he could not after all venture to believe what had seemed so plainly to be read that one happy moment of confident hope?

He went through the little gate, and after a step or two forced himself to look up. One or two gentlemen, newspaper in hand, going up to Opplestone on business, were waiting; a woman with two children occupied one of the seats, and those were all he saw at the first glance. Then he caught sight of the two ladies at the farther end of the platform, just as they turned to come back. He walked to meet them, dreading the approach of that tall slim creature in the plain dark blue dress, as if she were his judge about to pass sentence.

There was a meeting and hand-shaking, and an exclamation of surprise from Mrs. Norton.

"Is your holiday over?" she said. "How sorry you must be!"

Ingram, as they stood talking, dared not look at Mildred's face; his eyes went no higher than the gloved hand trifling with the lace of her holland sunshade. All his gay frank assurance had forsaken him with the loss of that secure sense of being one of Fortune's favourites; the diffidence of manner on this first facing of the world after learning the doubtfulness of his position, was a perfectly horrible experience. The jealous torments of those down in the world began at once. He fancied that Mrs. Norton must have some suspicion—that there was less of her usual cordiality. Of course it was only fancy, as she could not possibly know.

But it was not altogether fancy. Mrs. Norton was, as she would have said, "struck" by his look, and after that alarming mention by Mr. Heathcote of his son,

was on the alert for danger. Her manner was not easy. She liked Lewis, as, indeed, most people liked him, and her thoroughly kind heart was disturbed by his evident depression, and prompted her to extreme cordiality, even to a motherly proffer of sympathy and inviting of confidence—but her precious charge!

After the weather had received its toll, and her inquiries respecting the health of Mr. Heathcote and Gussy—always so full and anxious—were satisfied, she gave a little embarrassed cough and turned to her niece.

"You need not wait, my dear. You will be doing far better to join Katie on the sands. I have Mr. Ingram to bear me company."

"Very well," said Mildred, moving away with a slight bow.

Lewis then desperately looked at her for the first time. Her glance was cool and careless, as he had imagined it would be; the miserable wistful appeal of his glance gave her a little shock. She left the station, wondering reluctantly what it meant.

Lewis stared after her retreating figure with a half stupefied abstraction. Why had she been sent away?

Mrs. Norton was concerned at his strange look. "Oh, poor fellow! it will go very hard with him," she thought, "if anything *does* come in his way. How exceedingly trying it is, not to know—on e does not know how to behave! Here i s our train," she said, relieved.

"I suppose you will smoke?" she observed, a minute later, as she stepped into a carriage.

Lewis thought he would; and after shutting her in he sought a smoking-carriage.

He had it to himself, and he sat with his arms folded and head bent, forgetful of his cigar-case. The power of thinking clearly was returning; the stunned confusion was passing away. He made no attempt to conceal from himself the significance of last night's talk—no chance was his of gaining Mildred for his wife. Submission or non-submission to Mr. Heathcote's

wishes meant equally relinquishment of his own. The matter was simple enough. He turned hot and tingled with shame as he remembered how his presumptuous confidence in his position had been pointed out ; how he had almost entreated the man who was reminding him of his obligations, and warning him to be submissive ; how, in the first shock of the revulsion from hope to stern denial, he had in everything, except words, pleaded for—what ? A continuance of bounty ! That was what it amounted to. No wonder Mr. Heathcote imagined that he might be told to order his love affairs to suit his patron’s convenience and caprice ! After living as his favourite for all these years, why should he not be reminded of his position ? Why should he not be cautioned against presumption ? He must appear a mean, poor-spirited hanger-on, entirely devoid of pride and self-respect. Thinking it over, he believed he could read the frankest contempt in Mr. Heathcote’s tone and words. When all things went smoothly,

and there was no question of any collision of will—say rather obstacle to a whim of his—he was graciousness itself ; but at the first assertion of personal independence on Ingram's part, he adopted a tone of the harshest bitterness. The abrupt and complete change of manner had at the time bewildered Lewis, now he understood—it was simply the coming to the surface of the contempt which had lain latent and ready.

“It was unjust, it was fiercely unjust,” said Lewis, between his teeth, hot and smarting under the first-felt mortification as he realized the consciousness that had been in the other's mind, while he himself had lived in such careless forgetfulness of the fact that the advantages he enjoyed were not his by right.

And if in Mr. Heathcote's mind, why not in the minds of others? Every one welcomed and flattered him readily enough as a rich man's favourite and probable heir and would continue to flatter him as long as his patron chose to shed the sunshine of

his favour upon him, but they knew that **his** prosperity was held only through that **patron's** caprice ; that he was not in any **place** of his own, but in another man's, and **while** anxious to smile where fortune **smiled**, must have thought little of him for **accepting** what should be that other man's.

That other man ! Lewis's face darkened **and** he set his lips tight together. He had **never** liked Rupert Heathcote ; they had **never** “ got on ” together ; still, in his own secure possession of Rupert's father's affection, in his knowledge of a power to please where Rupert failed to please, he had hitherto thought of his rival with a sense of superiority, a sort of good-humoured pity. A very different feeling rushed into his heart now as he perceived the true nature of their relations. Had he not helped to do something painfully like injury to this son ? Had he not lent himself to be used as an instrument of injustice against him ? and, blind, egregiously blind as he was, he had positively imagined himself to be in a position of advantage over

the other; he had plumed himself on his greater acceptability to the father! How could he have been so unutterably foolish and mistaken?

Lewis did not spare himself; he took even a savage kind of satisfaction in exercising his new vision through what might be called an extravagantly powerful magnifying-glass—and a glass, moreover, which only showed parts of the whole. He sought for all the humiliating circumstances and writhed in a frenzy of shame. Forgetting, under the sting of those sarcasms last night, the affection and pride with which Mr. Heathcote had regarded him for years before, he felt as if all that Mr. Heathcote had done for him had been for his final mortification and confusion; and his wounded pride, wounded so suddenly and so sorely, was paramount and all-absorbing in its burning pain. It overbore all softer emotions—it craved satisfaction with the unappeasable craving of mortified feeling, and gradually a bitter resentment against Mr. Heathcote entered his heart.

Some things the banker had said, some of his tones and glances, seemed to possess a gratuitous harshness, almost vindictiveness, and Lewis pondered them now with a curious startled sensation. That dark saying, for instance, about the comedy he was preparing for his own amusement and for that of another probable spectator—what did it mean? He had spoken of throwing such uncertainty over Ingram's position as would be apparent to all, and more especially to the Nortons; he contemplated holding him in entire suspense, a suspense reflected upon his acquaintances, and of enjoying the humours of the situation thus humanely arranged by himself, with, perhaps, another to share his enjoyment. Lewis caught his breath as he thought of being destined deliberately for the victim of this sport. And who was the other onlooker? A chill suspicion of his rival flashed into his brain. He started as one starts out of sleep with a sense of falling, a fierce light in his eyes and his hand convulsively clenched. He leaned towards

the window, panting, pale, and almost suffocated by the rush of passionate emotions—oppressed by the confinement of the quick-moving carriage, maddened by fury at the threatened turn of affairs. *That* was putting down his confidence, indeed! It was the most ingenious punishment one man could devise for another! Lewis had sickened feeling, as if he had caught a glimpse of some inflicted cruelty. He was in so complete a trap! The return of his hated rival—yes, hated, most certainly hated—would, Mr. Heathcote well knew, be utterly obnoxious to him, yet he had no possible right to object; the rights and objections were all on the other side—the injured son's.

Did Mr. Heathcote imagine he would consent to be so played upon and played with? to have his suspense and fears turned into an entertainment for him and for his son? the expectations he had been led into sneered at as something deliciously laughable?

And then he thought of Mildred, and

knew how impotent, how terribly, cruelly impotent he was; his very heartstrings formed part of the bonds holding him to the man who had tired of him. Was he, by act of his, to throw aside any chance of being near her, of seeing her? In his ears was an echo of Elaine's pathetic plaint: “ Alas for me then, my good days are done.”

Opplestone was reached, and Lewis sprang out, eager to get the relief of rapid movement. He was hurrying along the platform, having quite forgotten Mrs. Norton, when she touched his arm.

She had been thinking, too, very busily during the thirty minutes' journey, and the more she thought the more uncomfortable did she find it to be in this doubt about Lewis's prospects. She had quite come to the conclusion that it was only fair to herself and her niece to have some definite idea of the position of affairs. She was uneasy, and she was curious, and she was also angry with Mr. Heathcote for what she took to be his vacillation. Really it

was most unfair; something was owed people's acquaintances. If you did not know who people were, how could you possibly know how to treat them? It was wrong to wilfully cause blunder unpardonably wrong. There could be no harm in trying to learn the truth; indeed it was positively due to her. With her curiosity and personal anxiety was mingled a real feeling for Lewis; she was honestly grieved to see his unhappiness, and difficult as she felt it to be to hit upon a judicious mean of friendliness,—to be neither too cold nor too gracious, neither to encourage him, in case of anything untoward occurring, to interfere with his suit, nor yet to starve or affront him on the chance of the opposite contingency—she was glad to put about any change in her behaviour. After a while the hurry was not so pressing, and then Mildred was safely out of the way. She drew his attention therefore.

“Were you going to cut me, Mr. Ingram?” laughing. “Our ways lie together. I am going past the Bank

so we may as well have each other's company.”

She stopped to give up her ticket. As soon as they were out of the station precincts, and were walking up the quiet street of the quiet little town, she said, “ You don't look well this morning.”

She spoke with a motherly kindness, and her glance was quite as kind as her voice; but poor Lewis, in his sore mortification, was only chafed at the mention of his looks. His faith in the genuineness of kindly interest was in its first upsetting.

“ I'm quite well, thanks,” he said.

“ Are you? That's right! You looked so unlike your usual self at the station this morning that really I was afraid you were in trouble. I quite feared that something was the matter at Grove House.”

Lewis cast a sidelong, faintly smiling look at her. “ What should be the matter?” said he, swinging his cane. “ We are all well.”

“ So you told me, and I was delighted to hear it. To tell you the truth, I

wondered whether—whether there was any unpleasantness,” said Mrs. Norton, lowering her voice. “There sometimes is in families, you know.”

“Ah! I suppose so.”

“Mr. Heathcote is a little odd, don’t you think?”

“Not at all. He is the last man of whom such a thing could be said,” said Lewis with slow emphasis. “He is, in fact, the sanest man of my acquaintance.”

“Oh, but I did not mean to hint at any—Of course I know how devoted you are to him. But now, frankly, *isn’t* he rather curious-tempered? That quarrel with his son, and now——”

“Yes—now?” said Lewis quickly, bending to her.

“This talk of having him back.”

“What talk?” in the same quick, breathless way.

“Oh, only a remark he let fall to Mr. Norton yesterday, as they came up to town. Mr. Norton was, as you may imagine, perfectly amazed at hearing

young Mr. Heathcote's name mentioned. But then, of course, it may be only a chance mention. He may not *mean* anything serious.”

Mrs. Norton had nearly got to saying how sorry she should be for him if the loving father's unaccountable longing actually carried him into action. But they had reached the office of Mr. Wood, the solicitor, and Lewis stopped.

“ I have a note to leave here for Mr. Heathcote,” he said, explaining distinctly. He looked at her full, and there was a very bright light in his eyes, as he added, “ Good morning.”

Mrs. Norton glanced at the significant brass plate. Her face changed, and hurriedly returning the “ Good morning,” she walked on.

Lewis left the note, and followed slowly to the Bank. It was one of the most imposing, and perhaps the most venerated building in the little country town. “ Heathcote's ” was a name to conjure with in local districts. The first name

of the firm, Osborne, had been dropped by Mr. Heathcote, when his father-in-law went hence, for he disliked any reminder of the source of his prosperity; and the haste he had shown to do away with the association of her maiden name with his business, had been one of the many slight to his gentle wife.

Lewis passed through the outer office hastily, holding his head high, and avoiding any of his usual pleasant greetings. He wondered if the clerks knew of his coming loss of favour. He was suspicious even of the respectful manner of the head clerk, who came to him in Mr. Heathcote's private room for certain instructions in the course of that long, unhappy morning, doubting the reality of his deference, fancying that behind it lurked pity for the deposed favourite. Who knew how many beside Mr. Norton had received a hint of the son's return? how many were on the watch for his own dethronement? how many were laughing in their sleeve at his unconsciousness?

He could not work—he did not attempt to work—so great was his fever of excitement to get back to Grove House to hear the truth of that report. He sat resting his throbbing brow upon his hands, in his heart a swelling tumult of wrong and injury and of fierce impatience. The head clerk received no satisfaction to his inquiries. Lewis listened stupidly, in spite of that brightness in his eyes.

"You know what to do as well as I do, Smithson," he said.

"But, sir——"

"What is the good of asking me?" he burst forth in uncontrollable irritability—the business details, the dry measured voice of Smithson, rasped his fretted nerves to frenzy. "Ask Mr. Heathcote to-morrow. He will be here then."

And when the man retired in mute amazement, not unqualified with indignation, Lewis gave vent to a little jarring laugh.

At last one o'clock struck, the signal for his release. It was almost a surprise

to him to find life proceeding as placid as usual when he reached home. Mr. Heathcote, returning from a stroll, met him at the gate of Grove House, and gave him a cool, but not unfriendly nod. "How did you get on, Lewis?" asked he, proceeding him up the garden. It was a question necessarily calling for an answer and it received none.

At luncheon there was plenty of talk. Mr. Heathcote asked various questions about business, which Lewis answered certainly, but so at random that the other raised his eyebrows.

"I can hardly compliment you on having spent a profitable morning," he remarked drily.

Lewis looked across in a sort of defiant what-can-you-expect fashion, and Mr. Heathcote thoughtfully went on with his meal, observing the young man closely meanwhile. What was the matter with him? He had a watchful expression, an excited look in his eyes; he gave little or no attention to Gussy's prattling account.

of her morning with her friends. Only when Miss Loraine's name was mentioned a bright flush crossed his pale cheek, and the banker saw that his hand trembled, and that he pressed his lips more firmly together. Mr. Heathcote was slightly puzzled, therefore annoyed, and thus warmed for the approaching interview. That Ingram should also be prepared, and even show an eager readiness, was a further annoyance. But after luncheon, when they had gone to the library, he stood on the hearthrug, evidently waiting, and impatiently waiting, too, for Gussy's departure, briefly and absently disposing of her regrets, etc., about his being detained.

"But you will come to tea? They expect you then!" she insisted.

"Yes, yes," said her father, "he shall come to tea. I shall not keep him more than half an hour. Now run away, little one!"

Gussy made a *moue* at the door. "Poor business men!" sighed she, with immense compassion, and departed.

There was silence till her dainty little figure had passed the window, then the two men turned to each other, and the eager excited brightness shone plainly in the younger's eyes. It was a breathless "Well?" as unmistakable as if spoken.

Mr. Heathcote jerked his chair a trifle nearer the table.

"Sit down, Lewis," he said sharply.
"I have something to say to you."

CHAPTER VI.

WAITING.

IN the afternoon Lewis came out of the Grove House and took his way to the river. As he went, walking with a certain calm steadiness, he looked about him, at the people he met, at the houses he passed, and at the sea and sky, not in his usual easy fashion, but with attention, and with curiosity, as of a man desirous of becoming acquainted with his surroundings from a new aspect. He gazed into people's faces with a kind of studious interest, as if he were meeting his fellows on a level different from that on which he had encountered them hitherto; yet, at the same time, the interest appeared forced and con-

tending against a blankness and dreaminess of expression.

At the foot of the slope his steps quickened, and he walked rapidly the whole length of the sands. It was too early to expect the return of the party of pleasure-seekers, but he remained at that end of the sands, walking up and down within the space of a few yards.

A group of children were digging near. He passed and repassed them; once stopped close by. They were engaged in the grimly suggestive pastime of burying one of their number; very securely was sand heaped and pressed upon him, leaving only the head uncovered; then the youthful grave-diggers stood aside, watching with derisive laughter and mocking cheers the desperate efforts of the embedded one to free himself. His struggles were the best part of the game, and the urchins, flattered at the gentleman's interest, looked to him for mirthful appreciation also. But the guarded expression had dropped from Lewis's face—he was staring blankly,

mechanically, unconsciously. A pert remark, addressed to him by one of the small boys, roused him and brought him back to the present again. He started, muttered an inarticulate word of apology, and turned away. Bill was moving about among his boats, very busy, but not too busy to spare a cheerful greeting and a remark or two; for the remembrance of last evening's sovereign was still green and sweet, and his voice had disguised itself in tones of respectful urbanity. Lewis enchained his straying thoughts by repeated efforts and smiled, but not at Bill's remarks. As the man hurried forward to receive a returning boat, Lewis went on. "How strange it seems!" he said to himself, glancing around at the familiar scenes and ordinary groups and actions.

At last the boat he was waiting for came into sight. They were rather late and were rowing fast; the oars flashed in the sunlight, throwing off showers of sparkling drops, the rowers bent to their oars with an easy swinging motion, delightful to see,

and borne over the water was the cheerful sound of singing—not too musical, however, for the singer was Rollo.

Ingram singled out the one figure to him, and at the first sight of it, he grew pale as death and his knees shook under him. He raised his hand to his lips and struggled for composure, summoning back with a mighty effort the guarded blank neutrality and steadiness of expression, and before they came near he had succeeded. Once again his nerves were sorely shaken, and that was when the boat grated on the shingle and Mildred rose and turned. A moment she stood, erect and slim against the sapphire background, her figure thrown slightly back in relief after the strain of rowing, her eyes shining with the exercise, her lips smiling, and her cheeks tinged with their own faint flush. The delicate radiance of the picture she thus made seemed to dazzle her lover's eyes; he was gazing stupidly while she stepped across the plank and reached his side. She gave him a mocking little bow

and smile, a smile as cold and fine and elusive as herself—to him.

"We have had a mishap," she remarked, with airy nonchalance.

"A mishap?" starting.

"Yes," gravely. "You will hear. Prepare to be harrowed."

"What is it? How did it happen?"

"Mr. Temple was rowing," began Mildred, a slight twitch at the corners of her lips.

"Well?" anxious and yet puzzled.

"Don't you guess the sequel? He plashed Gussy's dress."

Lewis made a little gesture of hurt anger. "How can you mock me so!"

She just lifted her eyelashes to bestow a cool glance upon him—then turned to Gussy, who after accepting Arthur's help on clinging nervousness across the plank, retulantly cast him off as soon as the landing was accomplished, and joined Mildred. Her dress was ruined, she cried pathetically, simply ruined; she would never be able to wear it again, and she had liked it

awfully—so had papa. And she never, never *would* go in a boat again when Mr. Temple meant to row.

Arthur quailed under the scornful glance darted at him by the offended young lady, moving uneasily before her, his ingenuously boyish face showing rosy penitence and contrition. Kate brought matters to a summary conclusion by beseeching them to walk on, in order to escape the disgrace of being taken for the proprietors of the boat, haggling over their profits. She lingered to settle accounts with Bill, while Guss flew after Rollo, who had strolled on with his hands in his pockets and his cap rakishly askew.

Mildred with a smile lured Arthur to her side, but though grateful for this kindness, he was not comfortable in making a third with her and Lewis, and to her disappointment fell back after the first few yards to wait for Miss Norton.

"How long you have been," said Lewis. "I thought you were never coming. I waited nearly an hour."

"We were rather longer than we expected—rowing was so delightful. It is an exquisite afternoon."

"I waited nearly an hour," repeated Lewis, with a sort of dull emphasis.

She laughed. "Well, what am I to say?"

"To say?" blankly.

"You appear to wish to impress that fact firmly upon my poor brain. Am I to break out into professions of abject repentance because you waited so long?"

"No," surprised. Then resisting that dull apathy—"But it seemed very long, walking up and down at the end there."

"The sense of your injury is strong, I see. It must have time to wear itself out. We really had no idea that we were ill-treating you—not the least. Gussy talked vaguely of the chance of your being liberated for afternoon tea—but not hopefully, as she appeared to think Mr. Heathcote's desire for your society would last some time."

"He had a piece of news to tell me," said Lewis, in a carefully controlled voice.

"Ah?" indifferently. He was not to assume that she had any interest in Mr Heathcote's announcements. But in spite of herself her heart began to beat rather fast.

"He has written to his son."

"What an attentive father!" Even as she scoffed she had a disagreeable suspicion that she was overacting her part. Any acquaintance of Lewis Ingram would feel interest, even anxiety, at this unlooked-for juncture.

"He wishes him to come home," added Lewis.

"Do you like this son?" asked Mildred after a little pause.

"*Like* him!" with sudden vehemence more natural than the measured guarded manner in which he had been speaking. "Why?"

"Because I feel in somewhat of a difficulty; I don't know whether your piece news claims congratulation or condolence."

He did not answer at first, and then in hurt, unsteady tones said, "It claims

neither. I—I—thought you would be interested."

"Of course I am. Who would not be interested in hearing of this long-exiled son? There is something a little romantic, don't you think, in his estrangement from his father? He was long before our day, of course. The whole neighbourhood will be interested in hearing his name spoken after all these silent years. What kind of man is he? Do you think it is likely that he will condescend to accept the olive branch graciously extended by his father? or that he will resent the prodigal-like suggestion of a return to the paternal roof?"

"I don't think he can refuse," said Lewis slowly.

"Mr. Heathcote's appeal is so eloquent and pathetic? One cannot imagine Mr. Heathcote employing pathos and sentiment with any facility," said Mildred musingly.

"His coming affects me more than any one," said Lewis, with the peculiar emphasis of a carefully prepared and im-

portant statement. "I—shall have to away."

He turned to see her face, hungering for one look or sign of sympathy, of sorrow. If *now* he could have caught one faint token that her heart was his! But her sunshade just hid her face, and perhaps saved him a sharper pain than the dull despairing disappointment—for he could not see the faint look of distaste and defiance which crossed it at this perilous approach to sentiment. The supposition implied in those low broken words and appealing tones that his movements affected her, offended Mildred none the less because of the reason she had herself weakly given for it. Fortunately the moment was not pressing; he could not trouble her by agitating professions and appeals; they had nearly reached the foot of the slope; the others were quite near; and Roland who had teased a stray dog and roused to impotent anger, was careering wildly around, shouting, snapping his fingers, and defying the bewildered creature, and might

at any moment launch himself headlong into the middle of their talk. The consciousness of present safety enabled Mildred to keep her composure.

"Must that be one of the consequences of young Mr. Heathcote's re-admission to filial privileges?" she asked.

"Can you suppose for a moment that I would live under the same roof with him?"

"Why should I not?" she thought. "You have lived in his place for so many years." The mortification of her own position made her rather hard towards him. She felt so intolerably galled. Not much shrewdness was needed to divine one at least of Mr. Heathcote's reasons for this unexpected manœuvre—it was to put a stop to Lewis's hopes of winning her; the astute banker calculated on her mercenary motives, and intended to frighten her and her aunt into discontinuing their encouragement of his *protégé*. Cool and serene as was her face, a tumult of anger towards Mr. Heathcote was in her heart. She was

half tempted to outwit him and bring ^{his} clever arrangement to failure; after all, ^{it} did lie in her own hands, she had only ^{to} decide. She started from the idea; ^{it} was out of the question. The mist ^{of} glamour was quite cleared from her eyes ^{as} it had only obscured them for a moment ^{and} and she saw Lewis again only as a somewhat commonplace young man.

"Does Mr. Heathcote do this knowing ^{that} that his son's return will be the signal ^{for} your departure?" she asked, disliking the ^{subject} subject, but feeling obliged to say some ^{thing} thing.

"No. He expected—" Lewis broke ^{off} then went on with the guarded slowness ^{as} he had used in speaking at first. "No. He expects me to stay. But that is ^{out} of the question. Rupert and I never ^{contrived} contrived to hit it off together." He ^{turned} turned to her again with that yearning ^{wistful} wistful look in his troubled eyes. "You ^{are} are thinking that it is late in the day for ^{me} me to pretend to spirit—after so many years—but then I did not know that he would ^{turn} turn

in—this way.” He spoke with hesitation and difficulty, as if searching for his phrases. “I was only a lad when it began—I never thought of it—till last night. Do you despise me utterly for living so?” searching her face.

“I despise you—or any one?” said Mildred, with a nervous little laugh of bitterness and ready self-contempt. “How should I cast a stone? I live in a glass house, you see!”

“You? Why, what else could you do?” in tender defence against herself.

For a moment the girl’s eyes smarted; his belief was so thorough, her return was so slighting.

To her great relief they had reached the top of the slope and she was saved from the necessity of replying by Arthur coming across the road to meet them. He was very disconsolate, for Gussy had fluttered into the house to pour out her wrongs to Mrs. Norton, leaving him still unpardoned.

“You are coming in?” said Mildred to

the two young men, when they had reached the gate of Grove Terrace House.

Lewis said he should be very glad—but he must first go back to Grove House for a letter he had been commissioned to post and had forgotten till that moment. He should just have time to catch the five o'clock post.

"You might walk along with me," he said to Arthur. "If you will excuse us for ten minutes, Miss Loraine?"

"Certainly," and with a gracious bow and smile she left them.

Lewis gave a lingering glance backward before he had gone many steps, almost stopping to watch the graceful figure out of sight.

Mrs. Norton was commiserating Gus very cheerfully as Mildred entered the drawing-room.

"Yes, my dear, very careless, very careless indeed of Mr. Temple—such a pretty dress." She turned to her niece with an eager inquiry in her expression, but Mildred met it blankly. Mrs. Norton,

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however, was in a radiant state of mind, and the cause of it was at once explained. "We will have high tea this evening," she said, looking round at the three girls with a beaming smile. "Mr. Norton took it into his head that he would run up to London, so he went directly after you had started."

"Then he won't be back to-night," observed Kate, with suspicious satisfaction.

"Are the others not coming, Mildred?" asked Gussy anxiously; for she contemplated inflicting an evening of direful penances upon the unhappy Arthur.

Mildred explained.

Tea was ready at six, the ladies were also ready, and the boys were more than ready, but Lewis and Arthur had not yet put in an appearance. Another quarter of an hour was given them, and then Mrs. Norton thought no further grace could be expected, and rang the bell.

The strange tardiness of the two young men had rather a damping effect upon

the others. Endless were the wonders and conjectures as the meal went on and neither appeared. Gussy pouted in unconcealed disgust—she had counted upon Arthur's torments for a piquant variety to the evening; it was unpardonable of him to dare to break an engagement and keep out of her way when he had put such a charming advantage into her hands. Unpardonable, and all the more provoking because his holiday would be over at the end of the week, when he must return to his curacy at Lynton. Kate suggested that Mr. Temple was too much discomposed at Gussy's anger to venture near her until forgiven, and proposed that a formal notification of pardon should be made out by the offended fair, and sent to the curate's lodgings. But Gussy did not relish this irreverent treatment of her displeasure.

"Mr. Heathcote has probably kept them to dine with him," said Mrs. Norton.

"Papa is going to dine out—at some old fogey's at Opplestone," cried Gussy.

The meal was lengthened, but still Lew is

and Arthur did not come, and the disappointment made the evening a little flat.

"My last evening too," said Kate, with a grimace. "It is hard upon me."

"You must come back again soon, Kate," said Mrs. Norton. "But it is very strange—can anything have happened?" in the easy way of one perfectly unapprehensive. "I am getting quite sleepy. Shall we have a little music to keep us awake?"

"I'll sing," cried Gussy, darting to the piano. When the tardy Arthur *did* come, it should at least appear that he had not been missed or wanted. She dashed into a lively song; her eyes sparkling with pique, her soft cheeks a lovely rose, her voice clear and strong with angry excitement. Never had she sung so well, as Kate frankly told her at the end of the song. Gussy shook back her hair and defiantly burst into another.

In the interval between the two songs Mildred thought that she heard the front door opened and shut, and steps in the

hall. She listened intently, but as no one came upstairs, she concluded that the sounds had been but fancy. She was rapidly growing very anxious. This lateness was so unprecedented, and to receive no message of excuse was yet more singular and alarming. About ten minutes after the beginning of Gussy's second song, the footman entered carrying a lamp.

"I did not ring, Thomas," said Mr. Norton, annoyed at the interruption.

"No, ma'am; but I thought a light would be acceptable."

He carried the lamp to the table which Mildred was sitting, her idle hands folded on her lap, and seemed to find great difficulty in adjusting the wick to his satisfaction.

Mildred heard an embarrassed cough, and glanced up to meet Thomas's eyes fixed eagerly upon her. In swift comprehension she put her arm on the table and leaned slightly towards the lamp. Gussy and Kate were trying a duet; the dear fresh voices filled the room with melody.

To Mildred's ear came a hoarse murmur,
"You're wanted downstairs, ma'am."

Then Thomas found that the wick was
right, and went to pull down the blinds.

Mildred stole out, ran downstairs with
noiseless flying feet, and was beckoned into
the back room by Arthur, who, with a
blanched, agitated face, was on the watch
for her at the foot of the stairs.

CHAPTER VII.

“MY FATHER MAY . . . MAY TAKE TO
LOVING ME.”

MISS OSBORNE was sitting next mornin' ~~ing~~
in the drawing-room of her house in Ma~~y~~-
fair. She was a substantial sort of perso~~n~~,
who lived in quiet luxurious style, wit~~h~~
very liberal ideas of comfort and of “every~~—~~
thing handsome,” but with no liking fo~~r~~
mere show. Her house was well furnishe~~d~~
and appointed in old and solid fashion, good~~—~~
and rich all through; and she exactly~~—~~
suited her surroundings. There was some~~—~~
thing ample, comfortable, and restful about~~—~~
her in her maturity and serene slow grace. ~~—~~
She knew the art of sitting still to perfec~~—~~
tion; she was never under any pressure~~—~~

engagements ; she was never in a hurry. She looked as if life glided on for her in a disturbed calm ; as if harass, pain, and trouble were things unknown—or unremembered. Of course she had had her share of all, but that was some time ago, and the years since had been full of gracious kindness and peace. It was said of her, with the envy and half grudge of anxious, burdened matrons, that she "took things easily ;" and the saying was perfectly true—now. She was in the prime of life ; she was wealthy ; she had interests and tastes to give her pleasure ; she had as much society as she chose to enjoy ; she was as independent as a human being could well be ; and she was perfectly contented and quite convinced that her lot was enviable. From suitors—and if it is remembered that she was one of the co-mitresses of a wealthy banker, it will be understood that her experience of lovers was not altogether contemptible—she had quietly turned away, certain experiences having invested the idea of marriage with

dread. She was very reserved, and just a little cold; and she accused herself of selfishness.

This morning she leaned back in the roomy luxurious lounge, the picture of sweet and benign womanhood. Her dress, of the palest grey, fell softly about the gracious curves of her tall figure. The bright waves of abundant brown hair, as yet untouched by silver, were crowned by a dainty lace cap, its bow of pale blue suiting admirably the tints of a complexion which her friends declared was "wonderful." Her brooch and watch-chain were of the richest, most massive gold, and the diamond mourning ring on her white, indolent hand was costly and beautiful. But her quiet blue eyes were less serene than usual, and there was the slightest perceptible dent between her fair eyebrows.

On a little stand beside her chair lay a book and two envelopes, one unfastened, the other with its contents protruding. More than once did Miss Osborne glance at that half visible letter and at the ad-

dress on the closed envelope, and every time the line on her white brow was dented more deeply. She had put down her book, unable to keep her attention to it. At length even a 'gentle sigh fluttered forth, and she unclasped and clasped her fair soft hands.

Hardly had these signs of mental disturbance escaped her, when a ring at the front door smote the dreamy silence of the house. It could not be a caller at that time of day, or, indeed, at that time of year, for Miss Osborne was, as far as her friends were concerned, out of town, having only come up for a day or two on business—and she suffered no apprehension of being disturbed. But the ring brought some pleasant memory to her; she smiled rather wistfully, and glanced again at the name on the closed envelope.

The door was opened; the maid announced "Mr. Heathcote," and a gentleman came in. He was tall and rather slight, with refined, well-cut features, light

brown hair and long drooping moustaches
dark grey eyes under straight dark brows,
with a peculiar steadiness and coldness in
their direct but rather indifferent gaze, and
a skin, naturally fair, but slightly darkened
by hot suns. His well-cut lips closed
firmly in repose, with a sort of deter-
mined reserve; and he had an imperious
way of holding his head—a trick of car-
riage not unlike his father's.

Miss Osborne sat up with a little sound
of pleasure and surprise, and held out both
hands. "Rupert!" she exclaimed.

Rupert crossed over, took her hands in
his, and stooping, kissed her on either
cheek in graceful foreign fashion.

"How fortunate I am to find you in
town," said he, squeezing her hands and
smiling. "It was only a chance, my call-
ing. I thought you would be at the sea-
side or in the country."

"I am at Hastings," she said, looking
fondly up at him. "I came up to town on
some stupid business about a house—my
lawyer is so uncomfortably conscientious

—and I have been detained by a hurt knee."

"Ah!" Rupert glanced down at the pale grey lap. "Nothing very bad, I hope?"

"Only enough to make me lazy," she answered, with a serene smile. "I was just thinking about you—wondering where you were and wishing to see you. Do you know, Rupert, that you have been most scandalously remiss in your correspondence lately? You always were a wretched correspondent—but——!"

"I have outdone even myself? I fear I do deserve reproaches," he said, taking a chair opposite. He leaned his head on the back and looked at his aunt with a lazy smile. "My patient listening to any abuse you may choose to heap upon me shall prove my deep repentance."

"If you are penitent, nothing more need be said. I suppose you have been wandering about as usual. Where have you been?"

"All over," indifferently. "I am thinking

of doing a little yachting—I haven't seen Norway yet."

"What a restless creature you are!"

"What would you have? A man must do something."

"It is most fortunate that you did take this chance of finding me in town," said Miss Osborne. "Apart from the pleasure of seeing you, I am quite relieved."

"Is it possible that I can do anything for you—that I am to be actually of some use?"

"I received a note this morning asking me to forward an enclosure to you, and as I had not the remotest idea where you might be at the present moment, I felt in quite a difficulty." She took up the opened letter. "This is my note, and this is the enclosed one for you," touching the other envelope lightly with the one in her hand.

Rupert rose, came to the stand, and took the note she gave him. At sight of the writing he raised his eyebrows and exchanged a glance with his aunt. "My

father!—What in the world can he have to say? And I am honoured too!" picking up the other.

"Read them first, Rupert," said Miss Osborne.

He laughed. "Aunt Eleanor, you are cautious."

"Yes," said Miss Osborne to herself, as he carried the letters back to his seat; "I need be cautious when I hate him so." A far away look came into her serene blue eyes as if she saw bitter, painful memories.

Rupert drew out the note addressed to her. It was very brief and ran thus :—

"Grove House, Salthurst,

"June 10th, 18—

"DEAR MISS OSBORNE,

"I wish to communicate with my son, and you are, I believe, the only person who can help me to reach him. May I trespass so far on your forbearance as to beg you to forward to him the enclosed? I regret deeply thus troubling you, as you will doubtless understand.

With many and heartfelt apologies, believe me, yours faithfully,

“CHARLES HEATHCOTE.”

The reader's face darkened as he read, and the lines about his mouth grew harder and colder. He made no comment, however, but opened his own letter. It was not much less brief.

“Grove House, Salthurst,—

“June 10th, 18—

“DEAR RUPERT,

“It is hardly necessary to begin by the assertion that you will be surprised to hear from me. I suppose you will be surprised; though, after all, when one thinks of it, there seems less reason for surprise at a breaking of our silence at the end of seven years than if it had been broken, say at the end of one. Seven years is a fairly long time—long enough for growth and changes; even for the calming down of a hot-headed lad's temper, and, shall we say it?—the cooling of a father's

displeasure. It strikes me as being also a long enough period for the experiment of living apart. Don't you think that we might safely attempt the experiment of living together again? Experience and time will have taught us wisdom enough to avoid irritating contact and collision. I am willing to make the trial, and I shall be glad to hear that you are the same. An early reply will oblige,

"Yours very sincerely,

"CHARLES HEATHCOTE."

Rupert with a laugh rose and gave it to his aunt to read.

"Well?" he said, when she had finished.

Miss Osborne carefully and in silence refolded it.

"It is characteristic, is it not?" said Rupert, with a scornful little smile; "not a word of——"

"Of apology?" she suggested slyly.

"Apology? No! I suppose it is unheard of for a father to apologise to his son. But what an offer of reconciliation—

if it can be called so; as hard and ungracious and arrogant as himself."

"Still it is an offer of reconciliation——"

"The olive branch flung with force into one's face!"

"It is a great step for *him* to make a first advance."

"The only first step that could be taken in our case," said Rupert, with quiet bitterness. He looked out of the window, his brows knitted. "Why has he done it? What can be his object, I wonder? What plan can he have in his head?"

Miss Osborne hesitated. A feeling of satisfaction was in her heart at Rupert's reception of his father's advance. She would hardly have owned it to a living soul, not even to Rupert himself. She was ashamed of it; but it was there none the less, and her sense of justice prompted some advocacy of the father's side—the most heartless and perfunctory advocacy.

"Why should you imagine he has any plan—in that way? Why not give him the credit of a good motive? He may," said

Miss Osborne, valiantly advancing what she believed to be an utterly untenable theory, "he may be sorry about the estrangement, and regret the past."

Her nephew burst into a laugh. "He *may*, certainly," he said.

And Miss Osborne experienced the relief of having done her duty—the consequences not being disagreeable.

"Can he have quarrelled with Lewis Ingram?" she suggested.

"It is very unlikely. You know he positively cared for the fellow."

"But his affection might cool. He hints at changes. Perhaps Lewis Ingram's wishes have clashed with his own—a time for that comes in most young men's lives. Some love affair," hinted Miss Osborne, musingly.

"Perhaps," said Rupert, very dubiously.

"But Ingram was on his blind side; he could do no wrong."

"That infatuation seldom holds through the serious affairs of life. But why need we hazard conjectures about reasons? The

question is"—very slowly—"what shall you do?"

"Answer his note," said Rupert carelessly, returning to his chair.

"Yes. But shall you—go?"

"Present myself meekly on approval, to be turned off with a month's warning, or rather less, an hour's notice being more in accordance with my father's mode of proceeding in his dealings with servants and sons, if the 'trial' does not please him? Can you ask?"

Again that stir of satisfaction was warm about Miss Osborne's heart, and again she bribed her conscience, with the greater willingness as it was so evident her words had all the freedom of irresponsibility.

"Rupert," reproachfully, "you are very hard, I fear—as hard as your father."

"That may be. But to show that I am not unamenable to softer influences, I will let myself be guided by your advice." He leaned towards her with a malicious little smile lurking in his eyes. "Here is an opportunity for the play of all your talents

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of gentle persuasion. Does not the picture appeal to your imagination? Obstinate and, of course, erring son to be subdued to a humble penitent, willing to clamour piteously for paternal forgiveness. Can a woman resist such a chance of exercising her influence for the insinuation of mild and lamblike emotions?"

"Rupert!" a faint increase of pink came into her fair cheek.

"What do you advise me to do?" he asked.

"I would not take such a responsibility on my shoulders for—*anything*!" almost with energy.

"Then to enable you to speak quite freely, I assure you that your advice shall have no weight whatever—nothing you say shall make any difference. Now, Aunt Eleanor, the praises of peace, and love, and filial piety!" and the mocking smile was more perceptible.

"Rupert, this is hardly kind," she said, reproachfully. She paused, but he still looked unrelenting. "It is not fair to ask

me for advice, or even for an opinion on this matter, or indeed about anything connected with your father," said Miss Osborne, and her voice trembled. Rupert sprang from his seat and kissed her hand.

"Forgive me, Aunt Eleanor. It was unkind. But I could not resist teasing you. I ought to have remembered; perhaps, though, it is because I do remember so well that my evil angel led me to hurt you."

"I cannot bear to remember," said the gentle lady, clasping her hands agitatedly together. "If there is anything I dread it is remembrance of the past. I dare not let my thoughts go back to it. Your dear mother's face comes between me and my prayers. Why has he written? Why has he stirred up those bitter waters? Does he think that any kindness to her child now can make up for his coldness and hardness to her, and to you? And he does not say a word of kindness, Rupert, my dearest! It is, as you say,

just like him—as cold and careless as he always was to you, and—to—to her. Oh, Rupert, why have you made me speak? I meant to say nothing—not a word! I had some weak idea that it was wrong to prejudice you—I knew that I could not speak calmly—but yet, if it is right, and I suppose it *is* right for you to accept his overture of friendliness. He is your father," she faltered.

"Right? I am not a schoolboy to be frightened by bugbears. He owes me some consideration, I think, but how much is shown in this precious effusion?" flicking the letter. "You may come if you like; that is what it amounts to, and even that gracious permission is only accorded for some purpose he does not deign to explain. He spares his pride splendidly. If I choose I may return, but he promises nothing, hints at no concessions; it is my pride that has to make the real sacrifice. I am to be satisfied with the mere invitation and accept things just as he chooses to let me find them. No," said Rupert,

controlling his anger all at once, as if he scorned to show any depth of feeling, and falling back into languid indifference, "regarded as an offer of reconciliation, this letter is decidedly a failure."

Here they were interrupted by the entrance of the maid with a telegram, which she brought to her mistress. Miss Osborne handled it rather nervously. "I get so few," she said, in deprecating explanation; "they have not lost their terrors through familiarity. I suppose it is from that conscientious lawyer of mine; it shall wait till after luncheon. It is folly to spoil one's luncheon, don't you think so?"

"The greatest folly in the world, except one—spoiling one's dinner."

"You will lunch with me, Rupert? Shall you mind putting up for once with the little shortcomings of a house in only temporary working order?"

"I have no dread of any shortcomings in this house," he replied.

"Well, I see no sense in being more uncomfortable than one is absolutely obliged

on
that
life

to be. Of course, cook came with me," admitted Miss Osborne.

"The admirable Phœbe? I accept your invitation cheerfully, Aunt Eleanor. How sensible you are to keep your servants, especially Phœbe, so well!"

"I could not part with her. Phœbe is unsurpassable," said Miss Osborne earnestly. Then turning the telegram about in her fingers with a perturbed look, she said, "Really, it is absurd; but I cannot help feeling a little nervous about this."

"Open it, and set your fears at rest."

"But it is absurd to have any," she persisted. "There is no one for me to have any fears about. I haven't a relation in the world I care for, except you, Rupert. I don't care enough for any of my friends to be anxious or troubled about them."

"Then you are as fortunate as I am," he said lightly. "Or rather, nearly so—I haven't a friend in the world. People one comes against for a day or two in travelling can't be ranked as friends, can they?"

"Not unless you keep them up."

"Heaven forbid!"

"I don't know whether such isolation is good for a man," observed Miss Osborne musingly.

"Neither do I."

"It must tend to narrow the sympathies. Don't you find that?"

"To my satisfaction, yes. To have wide sympathies appears to me about the most unlucky thing a man can have—when they are real. They seldom *are* real. Still the delusion must be sufficiently harassing." He smiled as he noticed that she still regarded the official envelope with apprehension. "Come, Aunt Eleanor, be courageous and open that; telegrams are not as terrible as they look. You won't enjoy your luncheon till you have learnt that is a mere harmless suggestion from your lawyer as to the advisability of adding some fresh wordy phrase to your new tenant's lease."

"Well," she said hesitatingly, "I think I will; he may want an answer at once."

Rupert went to the nearest window, and read his father's note again. Then he put it into his pocket, and, with his hands behind him, looked out into the dusty street. He hated, as did Miss Osborne, any reminder of the past, and as he gazed absently at the glaring, dusty pavement, his expression was cold and stern. The old anger, the old resentment, had risen up hot within him. But he had grown contemptuous of deep feeling, and ashamed of the impulsive, intense emotions of tragic youth, and he tried to keep his thoughts entirely to the present, and to be only amused at the epistle he had just received. Why had his father done this? His wish to have him back, whatever the reason, must surely have been urgent to force him to bend his stubborn pride to anything so distasteful as the writing of those few ungracious words. How galling and repugnant must the task have been! Rupert felt some malicious pleasure at the thought. Perhaps, though, and his face darkened, his father had found alleviation for his

sufferings in making his proposal the delicate combination of slighting carelessness and off-hand arrogance which he had secured. "I must show in my reply," thought Rupert, "that I have profited by my study of his peculiar qualities of style." And he pondered the turn of a sentence or two which should prove how faithfully he had indeed studied his model. In the middle of a felicitously ironical phrase, he was interrupted by a smothered, inarticulate cry from Miss Osborne. He hastily turned from the window.

His aunt was leaning forward, with cheeks from which the blood had been driven, and eyes, startled and dilated, fixed upon him. Rupert came to her concern.

"My dear aunt, what is the matter? Have you bad news?"

Her trembling hand tried to crush the pink paper as if she would withhold

"Oh, Rupert!—he is dead," she gasped.

A quick question passed from his eyes to hers, then he gently took the telegram.

from her now unresisting fingers. He read the message: "Mr. Heathcote died suddenly yesterday afternoon. Please acquaint Mr. Rupert Heathcote." He looked higher, with a mechanical expectation of seeing the name of Ingram, but it was a Dr. Ford's.

A hush had fallen on the two. A chill had struck the warm languorous atmosphere of the June morning. The house seemed intensely still; while the sounds of life without, the rattle of vehicles and steps of passers-by, appeared to come dull and muffled, as if from a great distance.

Rupert's first movement was to carefully fold up the telegram.

"I must go now," he said.

"Yes," said Miss Osborne.

"There is a train from Charing Cross in an hour's time. I will get that."

"When shall you reach—Salthurst?"

"Sometime about five, I expect. I shall get to Opplestone about 4.15, I believe, and there is sure to be a train to the seaside soon after that."

Miss Osborne noticed how well he remembered when this afternoon train started and arrived. Warmth was beginning to return to her after the shock, and she moved a little uneasily.

"I would go with you, Rupert, if it were not for my helplessness."

"You?—why?" he began.

"There is your sister——"

"Ah, yes! I had forgotten Gussy."

"She is sure to have friends at hand. I don't think she would really care to see me; but if it were not——" said Miss Osborne, laying her hand on her knee.

"It is out of the question. I can hardly refuse to go for a few days—for the funeral—but there is no need for you to be inconvenienced. Of course Gussy will have her friends at hand. You will excuse me now, Aunt Eleanor. Good-bye."

"Write to me, Rupert."

"Yes; but I shall see you very soon. Good morning." He kissed her and went away.

Miss Osborne felt that her strained knee

by
his

had done her good service ; yet she was conscious that she had not been quite sincere in her assertion of a willingness to go to her young niece's help, and also that she had made at best but a selfish excuse. For her knee was decidedly better, nearly well ; she had acknowledged as much to her maid that morning. It is an understood thing, however, that the incapacity caused by indisposition is variable according to inclination. Because Miss Osborne had felt equal to a return to Hastings a few hours ago, fortified by her dislike to London heat, and a strong desire to be at the seaside again, it by no means followed that she should feel well enough to encounter the discomfort of a hurried journey to a house of mourning, in order to sustain a young niece whom she dimly remembered as a child. Moreover, Gussy was her father's favourite, on the other side of the divided household, and kindly feeling towards her mother's sister was the last thing to have been fostered in her. No,

Miss Osborne saw very clearly how unnecessary any sacrifice was on her part. Her niece would probably resent a visit from her as a taking advantage of her bereavement.

And how was she to go to that house until at least it was ascertained how Mr. Heathcote had treated his son in his will? "I could not eat a morsel of bread under his roof, dead though he is, if he has been unjust to Rupert," she said to herself, with agitation.

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CHAPTER VIII.

“HASTE ME TO KNOW IT.”

WHILE Miss Osborne ate her solitary luncheon with little appetite and many thoughts, Rupert was travelling towards Applestone.

He had betrayed no feeling to his aunt, no indication of the effect of the sudden news upon him. He was too cold and too reserved to give any expression of feeling easily. And in this case his pride would not allow the weakness. He was terribly shocked, and although he resisted any softness, he could not help some remorse and regret—chiefly for the revival of the old bitterness and grudge just before the coming of the news. The fact that he had spoken pitilessly of his father, when

Death had even then so lately taken him, jarred painfully. That was the first effect. But though he gave this tribute of regret for the unconscious breach of good taste, his sense of the fit being wounded, at the bottom of his heart was a half provoked feeling—not quite strong enough for disgust, perhaps, yet strangely like it—at the unlooked-for event, which placed his father in sanctuary, so to speak, from his just resentment of long years of coldness and injustice. At the same time he found the news most difficult of belief: he could not associate the idea of the awful sacredness of Death with the man upon whom it had just fallen. The letter had given a last unneeded glimpse of him—arrogant, cynical, stubbornly proud, full of imperious life and will; to have that picture presented in all its vividness and life-likeness at the moment, and to hear the next that the headstrong worldly man was dead, was startling and violent.

“Life struck sharp on Death
Makes awful lightning—”

A lightning too blinding to allow clear vision.

He found a train at Opplestone ready to start for the seaside, and reached Salt-hurst at five o'clock. He had telegraphed to his sister to announce his coming, and as the train glided into the little station he scanned the platform with a half expectation of seeing Lewis. Rupert did not wish to see Lewis; he had rather not owe to his rival an obligation even so small as that of the mere civility of guidance—for the erection of Grove House had been since the great quarrel—but he did not care to proclaim his identity and advertise family disagreements to the railway officials by the confession of ignorance of his father's residence involved in asking his way. He shrank fastidiously from the notice and interest attracted by members of a family invested with all the importance of recent bereavement.

Ingram was not to be seen; but Rupert was spared the annoyance of encountering any more of the railway officials' curiosity

than a broad stare. He was singled out for this attention at once by a slim and solemn young footman, who stepped up to him after only a glance of doubtful inquiry, and touching his hat, asked if he was Mr. Heathcote. Rupert handed his bag to the man, preceded him out of the station, and a few steps beyond the gate, turned for direction. The footman, who looked stolidly blank and whose mouth was screwed up as if with the determination to let no unguarded word escape, pointed to the large house, gleaming in yellow-white conspicuousness on the left.

"There's a cut across the field, sir," he said, and Rupert took the cut.

Relieved from the duties of escort, Robert re-entered the gate, towards which the two porters and the station-master had closely pressed. The other passengers, some two or three, were already on their way down the lane. The four men looked after the single figure walking rapidly across the field.

"He don't know, I suppose?" said the station-master.

Robert shook his head. "How's he to know? The telegram was 'died suddent'—them was the words—'died suddent.' I'm glad he's gone on. It would have been awk'ard if he'd begun asking questions. That's what I was so afraid on; there's some things one would rather not tell a man promiscuous out in the open air."

This opinion was feelingly assented to by the three officials.

"Well, you know," said one porter, "it's not at the same time as if he could be reckoned to be very fond of the old gentleman."

"There's some things can't help shocking a man's feelings, whether he's much affection to spare or whether he hasn't. At least, that's my belief," said Robert, with the proud modesty of one sure of his position.

He was cordially agreed with once more, the porter, who had ventured upon an

independent remark, eagerly joining with the popular voice.

"There'll be changes, Mr. Sampson?" suggested the station-master sympathetically.

“It’s a world of changes,” sighed Robert, who was not without relish of the interests attached to him as one of the inmates of the great house.

"So it is," said the porters with melancholy fervour.

"Ay, you're right," added the station-master. "Any way, I hope, Mr. Sampson, as the changes, whether few or many, won't affect you considerable."

"Ay, it would be hard on you to lose a good situation," said a porter.

"If it's to be Mr. Ingram, I've no fear ~~of~~; if it's to be the other, well, I can't tell you ~~of~~," said Robert. "I shall do my duty, ~~that~~ you may depend upon," solemnly. "~~B~~ut a man ain't always fairly treated for do~~ing~~ his duty, and I don't mind saying ~~as~~ I feel my position extremely awk'ard, ~~not~~ to say critical. Here am I," putting Heath-

cote's bag on the ground and spreading himself a little, "willing to do my duty, and *h'able*, but fairly stumped for want of knowing *which* party to please." Robert fixed an impressive gaze on his auditors. They were immensely thrilled. They glanced at each other, at the bag, and back at Robert.

"It is awk'ard, Mr. Sampson," said the station-master at length.

An almost inaudible murmur came from the independent porter. "Both," he began and broke off, alarmed at his own temerity.

But Robert graciously received the suggestion. "I did think of that," he said, "but I hear from the housekeeper, Mrs. Wiggett, as there's never been no love lost between the two young gentlemen. In that case," expounded Robert shrewdly, "to please one won't be to please the other."

"Surely not."

"So you see the difficulty of my position," said Robert, picking up the bag.

"It beats me fairly."

"Well, I hope you'll pull through a right, I'm sure," said the station-master warmly. "It won't be for long, and that be one thing as 'll comfort you. When's the funeral to be, Mr. Sampson?"

"Saturday."

"Well, you have my good wishes, I'm sure; and if you're not unwillin' to take a word of advice, I'd say, *stick to Mr. Ingram*."

"Yes?" said Robert, interested, when the porters gazed with open-mouthed admiration at their chief, dazzled by the intellect that could see any light upon a perplexity so confounding.

"He was the old man's favourite, was he? Nat'rally, then, he'd leave the tin to him; being removed so awful sudden, as it were, he'd not have time to think of his son and change his will. Stick to Mr. Ingram, Mr. Sampson, now do."

"To tell you the truth, Mr. Harper, I believe you're more than half right," said Robert confidentially. He nodded with suitable solemnity and departed—not by the path across the fields, however, being

of a sociable temperament, and by no means unwilling to give the village people the pleasurable excitement of seeing him.

Meanwhile, Rupert had reached the large house, with its closely shrouded windows, which gave it an air of dignified inward concentration of sorrow and importance. A hush of deep silence reigned over the place. The bell was muffled. He was admitted by a fashionable maid, whose gloom seemed real rather than conventional, and who curtsied and then stole before him with an almost stealthy noiselessness. She ushered him into the drawing-room, murmured something inaudible, and then closed the door with the same careful softness.

The room was darkened by the closely-drawn green Venetians to a decided twilight. Rupert had fancied he heard the low deep tones of men's voices just before the door was opened, but there was silence as he entered—he felt it, a breathless hush of expectation and curiosity, and it had the effect of making him stiffen jealously

into his reserve. It was a curious experience, being silently ushered into the silent room, where in the dim light dark figures awaited his entrance with that thrill of subdued yet watchful interest; for, somewhat to his surprise, there were three to receive him.

A grey-haired, dapper little man sat in an easy chair, nursing his knee, his head tilted back. A young clergyman, with a fair, frank, troubled face was at a table, resting his elbows upon it, his chin propped between his hands. There was a third, more in the background, and this third rose slowly and languidly from a deep lounge, and with a certain reluctance and hesitation came forward. The graceful figure was familiar, and yet unfamiliar because of the subdued languor of its movements. Lewis advanced to within a yard or so of Rupert, and then stood still. He did not offer his hand; he looked into Rupert's face doubtfully, as if uncertain how to greet him. His appearance and manner were those of a man fatigued to

apathy by exhausting emotion. For a moment the two confronted each other, then Rupert gravely and slightly inclined his head. He gave the same greeting to the two others, who had also risen.

"I was only telegraphed for this morning," he said to Lewis, in clear neutral tones. "Was there not time to summon me before——"

Lewis slightly shook his head, turning towards the middle-aged gentleman as if deputing the task of spokesman to him.

"Before the melancholy occurrence?" said Dr. Ford at once, in suave, regretful tones. "No, my dear sir, there was no time."

He coughed. Arthur moved uneasily.

"So sudden? How did it happen? Was it a fit?" asked Rupert.

Dr. Ford placed a chair and laid a hand of authority upon his sleeve. "Sit down," he said kindly, and as Rupert mechanically obeyed, the doctor resumed his own seat and leaned forward. His bright eyes rested with a certain compassion upon the

new comer ; his tones were soothing and encouraging, the tones of a professional inflicter of pain as well as of alleviation. Arthur repeated that fidgety little movement, and averted his eyes from the face of Gussy's brother. Lewis had gone round to his seat in the shade, and was lying back as though half oblivious of what passed.

"The cause of death is precisely the mystery that is engaging us now," said Dr. Ford, in those dulcet sympathetic tones, which yet, dulcet as they were, had a certain deliberate significance which did not escape Rupert. An imperative question came into his eyes, which were so steady and searching, that the doctor's gaze fell for a moment. "It is a very delicate and distressing thing," he went on. "I wish to prepare you for a shock, which in spite of —of—some circumstances," he coughed, "must be severe and painful. There was no time, Mr. Heathcote, for any of the customary preparations for departure from this sinful world, no time for the sum-

moning of absent relatives and friends, no time even for the ceremony of taking leave of those at hand,"—the doctor's voice trembled, partly with real feeling, partly with emotion at his own words. "The end came——"

Rupert turned in abrupt appeal or rather command to the other stranger, just as Arthur, unable to bear the prolonged agony of this dallying with suspense, looked quickly and straight across at him.

"We have a fear that the end came by violence—not by any natural means," he said rapidly and distinctly. And as soon as he had dealt the humane thrust, he gazed hard at the table again.

Intense silence succeeded. Rupert neither moved nor exclaimed. Involuntarily he set his teeth hard on his lower lip to keep back any ejaculation of the horror that fell in one swift, chill, overwhelming wave upon him. The chill seized his very heart; he had a difficulty in breathing; the horror seemed to touch him palpably, and a paralysis to fall upon his

limbs, something of that benumbing sensation of helplessness known in nightmare. Indeed, the whole thing was a nightmare; the darkened room, the silence weighted by the watchfulness of the three men, who were studying the effect of that ghastly announcement. He would not gratify their morbid curiosity by any exhibition of emotions—the sudden resistance and defiance were as stimulating to the nerveless oppression of horror as a dash of cold water to one fainting. They even enabled him to draw his breath more easily; to still the heavy, labouring gasps which seemed to pulsate through the dreary room.

“Will you be so good as to tell me the reasons for this suspicion?” he said formally to the doctor.

Dr. Ford had been displeased at Arthur's ruthless taking of that announcement out of his mouth, having claimed for himself the distinction of communicating the “appalling intelligence” to the son about whom so much interest and curiosity were gathered—a distinction which would

add a value to his professional visits for weeks to come. Of course, his attendance at the scene of the calamity and the important part he took as medical officer of the district, would give him great worship in the eyes of his patients ; already he foresaw in what request his visits would be after this exciting tragedy, for nothing so exciting and nothing so tragic had occurred at Salthurst within the memory of its inhabitants. He would be able to give at first hand all the gossip about the "fatal house" (this appeared the proper phrase), the "unfortunate victim," and the "members of the deceased's family ;" he revelled in anticipations of his popularity. But he had coveted the culminating glory of "breaking the news" to the son, and of being able to tell those minute particulars about the effect of the shock, the looks, tones, gestures, etc., etc., which are so keenly interesting to vulgar human nature. This finest distinction was denied him, thanks to young Temple's ill-considered hurry ; still, much remained ; *he* had pre-

pared young Heathcote, and he could report on his demeanour, and draw upon his own imagination when actual details failed to round off the narrative properly. Moreover, he was greatly mollified by the recognition of his claims to be informed implied by Rupert's addressing him now.

"I fear it is more than a suspicion," he said. "There are unmistakable marks of violence upon the—body."

Rupert winced; try as he might he could not help giving so much sign of the sickened shrinking that came over him at the prospect of hearing these details. He changed his seat abruptly for one sideways to the doctor, and with hand shading his eyes prepared himself to endure.

"There is the mark of a blow on the left temple," went on Dr. Ford, "as if given by some blunt instrument, or by a fall against the edge of the table near which he was discovered sitting—"

"Perhaps," said Rupert, "it was only a fall." He spoke eagerly, anything was less horrible than to think the sacrilegious.

gious hand of murder had touched his father.

"There have been many suppositions, of course," said Dr. Ford. "Each one has his own theory to advance; but it appears to me that little can be said for that of an accidental fall. Don't you see, he would have lain where he fell, death having been instantaneous? Now, as Mr. Temple will tell you, it was not so. He was found lying back in his chair. And then again his linen here," laying his hand below his throat, "was crumpled and disarranged as if he had been grasped so," seizing himself by the collar. "He would not be likely to do that himself, Mr. Heathcote."

Rupert merely inclined his head towards Arthur, as an intimation that he would hear his story now. Arthur told it rapidly and with an agitation he was not quite able to control. His heart was bleeding because of the calamity that had fallen upon his poor little love, and his nerves were still greatly shaken by his discovery

yesterday. Ingram and he had returned from a row with some friends—at least, ~~he~~ had been rowing, Ingram had joined the ~~in~~ on the beach on their return—and ~~had~~ walked on to Grove House for a letter Ingram wished to post. They went ~~to~~ the library for it, he, Arthur, going ~~in~~ first, and there in his chair between ~~the~~ window and table they had found Mr. Heathcote as Dr. Ford had described, quite dead, with a bruise upon his temple.

"I was summoned at once, and I found that he had been dead quite an hour," I should say," added the doctor.

"Who saw him alive last?" asked Rupert.

"I think I did," said Lewis.

"How long was it before, should ~~y~~^{you} suppose?" said Rupert.

"As near as I can guess, from ~~wh~~^{at} Dr. Ford says about the length of ~~time~~ he must have been dead, nearly an hour," said Ingram in lifeless tones. "Gussy left us after luncheon at about half-past two. I would have gone with her for ~~the~~

Now had not Mr. Heathcote detained me to talk over some business—he had not been at the bank that morning, and I had. He said he should keep me only half-an-hour, but as a matter of fact the clock struck the quarter past three before I left the library. I walked down to the beach and waited there fully an hour for the return of the boating party. And it must have been half-an-hour or more after that when Temple and I discovered what had happened."

"Ah," said Dr. Ford, "the murderer had evidently been watching his opportunity, and must have effected an entrance as soon as he saw you leave the house. It was a planned thing, no doubt of it."

"I don't agree with you there," said Lewis shortly.

"No, no; we each have our ideas."

"Did you notice any one lurking about near the house when you left it?" asked Rupert, addressing Lewis with an effort.

"No. I don't remember noticing a creature."

"Mr. Ingram would of course be unobservant. How could he possibly have any suspicion of danger, and *such* danger?" said Dr. Ford. "We live nowadays in security; a man hardly scans a quiet lane for lurking assassins when he sallies forth on business or pleasure. That proves nothing—I mean the fact of Mr. Ingram's noticing no suspicious-looking individual. The greater the scoundrel, the greater would be his precautions to avoid observation. He could hide himself in a ditch in the field, or even among the bushes in the garden here."

"He does not seem to have taken very careful precautions," said Rupert. "A man bent on crime would hardly choose broad daylight and such a conspicuous place."

"No," said Arthur. "I agree with you, Mr. Heathcote. The most probable explanation is that the person, whoever he was, having some shrewd idea of the deserted state of the house—for, as it happened, the only servant on the premises a

the time was Mrs. Wiggett, the old house-keeper—was bent on robbery, and that on his coming unexpectedly across Mr. Heathcote, a little tussle ensued, and the poor old gentleman was thrown down or struck."

"Yes. We all have our ideas," repeated Dr. Ford, with a little scorn. "Now, gentlemen, allow me to suggest one or two trifling objections to the theory of the casual thief and the unpremeditated attack. If the thief was startled on finding Mr. Heathcote in his private room, would he not have taken refuge in flight? Why should he attack an elderly gentleman when escape was so easy? *He* would be nearest the door! Then, in a case of robbery, is it not more likely that the thief would come at night? How could he expect to carry away any considerable amount of valuables in broad daylight from a house situated conspicuously enough close to a frequented road and a not much less frequented field-path? Then, chief objection of all, nothing has been missed!

nothing has been taken!" The doctor concluded with almost an air of triumph.

"There is a great deal in what you say," said Rupert, and for a moment or two remained in deep thought.

"Much, my dear sir, much," emphatically.

"Still, I can think of no other like theory—unless it was one of the servants."

A decided negative came from all three.

"Impossible," said Lewis, with more energy than he had yet shown.

"They are quite clear of any suspicion," said Arthur.

"Yes, their absence that afternoon has been satisfactorily proved," added Dr. Ford. "Robert, the footman, had gone up to town by the three p.m. train on an errand to Tompkins', the ironmonger's. The station people have testified to his leaving Salthurst by that train; Tompkins has proved that he was in his shop from about 3.45 to 4.15, and the station people at this end have borne wit—

ness to his return by the 4.30. That disposes of Robert. The gardener was away the whole day, at work in the Thornlea gardens. And of course the women-servants are exempt from any suspicion; even had it not been proved that, with the exception of Mrs. Wiggett, they were all out of the house during yesterday afternoon—two having received leave to drink tea with some friends in the village, and the third being invalided at her own home in Opplestone. Mrs. Wiggett, whom no doubt you will wish to question——”

“Yes, presently,” said Rupert.

“Was in her sitting-room at the back of the house and heard and saw nothing. But then she is getting old, and is, I fancy, rather deaf.”

“Has any servant been dismissed lately under—unpleasant circumstances?” asked Rupert, again addressing Lewis with almost visible effort.

“Dear me, I never thought of that!” exclaimed Dr. Ford. “You are sharp, Mr. Heathcote.”

But Lewis said no. The servants had all stayed well ; there had been no changes for at least two years. Dr. Ford was not sorry to hear this. He had his own pet theory, and was loth to have it shaken. It was more romantic, more interesting altogether than idle suggestions of stray burglars or respectable domestics—being no other than the theory of a secret enemy and a planned revenge. Mr. Heathcote had been a “hard man ;” doubtless he had made some man his enemy by treating him relentlessly in money matters. The enemy had cherished for years a scheme of revenge ; he had bided his time, watched the house, had a passionate scene with his hated foe, and finally seized him by the throat. When Heathcote turned to the doctor with an imperious, “You have not yet put forward your own opinion,” he coughed, eager to do so, and yet embarrassed at the ungracious necessity he was under of disregarding the pious injunction : *De mortuis nil nisi bonum*. As delicately as words would allow he explained his

theory. Rupert's lips tightened as he heard it, but he made no comment, nor did he ask Ingram if he was aware of any episode in his father's life that might give support to this hypothesis.

"This is of course only mere supposition," Dr. Ford thought fit to add.

"Of course," was the stiff rejoinder. And after a pause Rupert added, "In point of fact, nothing is known but that—death was caused by violence?"

"Nothing. The whole affair is wrapped in the most impenetrable mystery."

Some only half-controlled relish in the doctor's bland, melancholy accents reached Rupert, alert and keenly watchful as he was in his jealous, defiant reserve, and he writhed. He got up hastily, his face ashy pale and his eyes alight with a dangerous passion.

"Has nothing been *done*?" he demanded fiercely, looking across at Lewis, whose inert attitude and apathetic manner exasperated him—perhaps none the less because violence of grief and bitterness of


denunciation would have given even greater offence.

Lewis started violently, almost rose from his chair, looking bewildered and startled, like a man roused roughly from a dream. "Done?" he repeated vacantly.

Dr. Ford looked at him compassionately, and from him to Rupert.

"Everything has been done that could be done," said the doctor. "The inquest was held this morning, but nothing more came out of it than what you have heard. The police have taken up the affair, but not with very sanguine hopes of discovering the murderer, for as Stobbs, the man here, very justly says, there is positively no clue. I expect he is waiting to see you now, in order to report himself."

On inquiry that proved to be the case, and Stobbs was shown into the room. But he could tell no more than what Heathcote had already learned; nothing was known; no one was suspected. And the policeman talked only despondently of the chances of detection. He confessed



himself quite at a loss, resenting as a personal grievance the entire absence of any clue, with bitter lamentations over the culprit's shortsightedness and lack of consideration in thus providing no aid for the law's officers. The Grove House tragedy was the most important piece of business that had ever come within the range of his experience, and he was suitably sensible of the fact and fired with the utmost enthusiasm; but, as he argued, in such a case the greatest discrimination and assiduity must bow to defeat.

"There ain't nothing to start from! That's what I complain on," he said. "Such a piece of work I never heard tell on before. Not so much as a wepping left behind as would give one a start! Most murderers leaves a wepping or something behind 'em to give the p'lice a lift, but this one's more audacious than all. He's been a villain out and out, a reg'lar one. I'd like to come across him, apart from the interest I take in him from the law's side—he'd be a man as could learn

one a good deal. But under the circumstances I'd be glad if any one would tell me what a intelligent officer's to do."

"I've no doubt you've done your best," said Rupert a little wearily. "You must not be discouraged yet."

"I shouldn't be, sir, if there was a weeping," replied Stobbs.

"The mystery must be cleared up. I shall engage detectives on my own account, and offer a reward. Everything shall be done to bring the truth to light"—with a quiet sternness and determination.

"It'll take you your lifetime, sir."

"Very well"—curtly.

"Don't you agree with me, sir?" said the policeman to Lewis.

"I think discovery will be very difficult."

"Rather! If only the fool 'ad left his weeping!"

Hardly had Stobbs bowed himself out of the room when Robert entered with noiseless tread. He glided to within a yard or two of Ingram's chair, and addressing him somewhat ostentatiously,

desired to know if he would have dinner served.

The prosaic interruption came with strange effect upon the earnest discussion of the terrible event; but perhaps only Arthur perceived the full incongruity. Lewis with apparent difficulty took in the meaning of Robert's remark and listlessly referred him to Rupert, who impatiently waved away the subject.

"Dinner?" said Dr. Ford briskly. "A sensible suggestion, Robert. It is at times like these, when nature's forces are exhausted by the strain upon the feelings and emotions, that good feeding is absolutely indispensable. Let me advise you, Mr. Heathcote and Mr. Ingram, let me advise you authoritatively as a physician, to recruit exhausted nature. The recommendation will appear repugnant, but a little effort in the cause of common-sense is, I assure you, desirable."

Rupert only shook his head, and Lewis, thus forced to take upon himself the duties of host, begged Arthur and the doctor

to go to dinner. "You will look after Dr. Ford, Temple," he said, and the two gentlemen rose—Arthur to oblige Ingram and also because he thought it might be better to leave the two mourners alone. He waited to say a few words to Lewis, and Dr. Ford seized the opportunity of addressing Rupert apart.

"He is dreadfully cut up, poor fellow," said he, indicating Lewis by a little jerk of the head. "Feels it as if it had been his father—couldn't show more feeling if it had been. Grief seems to have quite crushed and bewildered him. I wish I could persuade him to take something."

Rupert glanced at Lewis with a rather contemptuous curl of the lip. It gave the doctor the idea that this commiseration of his was not altogether soothing to his listener, and how to deftly turn his sympathy at once into the right channel, that is towards Mr. Rupert Heathcote, he knew not in the moment's flurry at his mistake. "How stupid of me! of course they can't be fond of each other. It's

not in human nature that they should be,"
thought he.

"You look wretchedly upset, Mr. Heath-
cote," he said deferentially. "No wonder.
I assure you, you have my most heartfelt
condolences."

But the bereaved man drew himself up
in such haughty stiffness that the doctor
was again embarrassed.

"Do reconsider your decision about
dinner—or at least take something—a little
soup——"

"Thank you, I could touch nothing."

"Let Robert bring you some wine or
brandy—yes, brandy is the thing," said the
kind, fussy little doctor.

"Nothing—nothing. You must pray
excuse me."

He drew a breath of relief when the
door closed on the soundless exit of the
two strangers. He thought he was alone,
and he sank down in his chair and resting
his elbows on his knees, buried his face in
his hands, giving way to the wave of
horror which swept over his heart and

brain. A great pity, a sort of rage of pity was in his soul towards his father—he could not rid himself of the feeling that the dead man was cruelly dishonoured. He shrank in an extremity of repulsion, physical, mental and moral, from the thought of violence, from the very carelessness and heedlessness of the chance that had brought death.

A slight sound shook his tortured nerves, and he raised his face with a great start. Ingram was standing before him about two yards off.

“Don’t you think it would be better to leave me alone?” said Rupert, forced into bitter speech and return to the old familiarity of antagonism by his shaken nerves and his shame and anger because his agitation had been seen by the man he so heartily disliked.

CHAPTER IX.

“NOTHING’S KNOWN.”

“I BEG your pardon,” said Lewis, involuntarily retreating a step. “I had no thought of intruding. I merely wished to know if you would see Gussy now.”

Gussy! he had not thought of her once.

“She is upstairs, I suppose?” he said slowly.

“She is not in the house. She is staying with some friends, the Nortons. Fortunately she was spending last evening with them when——”

“Yes, I understand. Who are the Nortons? I don’t remember the name.”

“They live at Lynton. Mr. Norton came into a fortune some years ago, and

bought the manor house where the Ashleys used to live. They have only been in the neighbourhood a year and a half."

"Ah!" Rupert took no interest in the new neighbours. He dropped his brow upon his hand again, and meditated. The proposal of calling even upon his sister was distasteful; the need for exertion it entailed was irksome. And then it seemed so unnecessary. The call could give neither Gussy nor himself any gratification; to both it would be only painful and constrained. They were too thoroughly estranged by family divisions and the long years of separation. Each must have grown out of the other's knowledge. What advantage was it for either to see the other? He would only be here till after the funeral. Why give her the unnecessary pain of a brief interview? He had, however, a dim idea that in civilized conventional life it might be in accordance with propriety that members of a family should at least assume some appearance of sharing their

grief on such an occasion, and he was certainly Gussy's nearest relative. Lewis appeared to take this attention from him to his sister as a matter of course, and no doubt Lewis knew what was expected.

He pulled himself out of his chair. "I suppose I had better go," he said, somewhat grudgingly. "Where do these people live?" he added, as an afterthought, when he had reached the door.

"I was going with you; but if you prefer it, I will only direct you. The house is easily enough found."

"You may as well come. I don't care to ask my way," said Rupert. He could not help speaking both impatiently and ungraciously. Ingram's diffidence was irritating, it was showing too transparently his recognition of his position as interloper; and for some caprice, partly generosity, partly sheer contradictoriness of antagonism, which finds fault with everything done by an enemy, Rupert disliked this open acknowledgment of the fact, however great its truth. "He invites trampling," thought

he, with disgust, doubting the sincerity of the invitation, as in all probability *he* might be proved the interloper. He expected nothing else, and Lewis, who must have as shrewd an idea as any one how things would turn, would enjoy thus tempting and misleading his rival.

Rupert went out into the hall, and paused as he was taking up his hat. The hush in the house was painful, and the slight sounds from the dining-room of subdued and careful movements seemed to make it only more noticeable. He glanced at the stairs leading up into the unknown darkened upper regions, and a quiver of uncontrollable shrinking passed over his blanched face. "I will see him to-morrow," he said to himself.

He abruptly put down his hat, and turned to Lewis.

"Will you show me Wiggett's room?"

Lewis walked towards the back of the hall, pointed out a door, and returned to wait in the drawing-room. Rupert knocked gently and entered the housekeeper's sanctum.

Mrs. Wiggett had been his mother's attendant in her maiden days, then her nurse and her children's nurse, and after her mistress's death had remained in the family in the honourable position of valued housekeeper. Mr. Heathcote had been a generous master, if an imperious one, and to those servants who suited him and stayed he had been considerate and kind. Mrs. Wiggett had an exceedingly comfortable berth of it. She had been devotion's self to her mistress, and had grieved greatly over the disagreement between father and son, but it could not be said that she took the part of one more than of the other. Her loyalty was of an uncritical, unquestioning kind, and given without reservation, to every member of the family, including Lewis, whom she looked upon as one of the family, and whose bright kind ways had endeared him on his own account.

A cheerful fire was blazing on her hearth although it was June, and the old lady was leaning towards it, with outstretched

shaking hands. When the door was opened and closed and she looked up and saw the tall son of her dead mistress, she rose to her feet, dropped an unsteady curtsey, and stood staring at him, her mild old eyes troubled and almost fearful.

Heathcote came and took her hand ; it was cold and limp, and she was shaking from head to foot. When he sat down opposite, she sank again into her arm-chair and held out the trembling hands which the fire could not warm.

"Oh, Mr. Rupert," she moaned, "oh, Mr. Rupert, that ever I should have lived to see this day."

"I want you to tell me what you know," he said.

"Haven't they told you?" she said, almost querulously. "I've been asked over and over till I'm stupid, and hardly know what's truth and what's fancy. Nothing's known, Mr. Rupert, nothing's known ; you can't make no more of it than that."

"I do not wish to distress you," he said

gently ; "I am sure you have been sorely troubled, but it is very important that I should hear everything."

"There's nothing to hear, sir," she replied. "The doctor and the others know all."

"You were the only person in the house ?"

She trembled violently and rocked herself with moans from side to side. "To think I was in here, safe, and that going on—to think he should die like that and no one to go near, no one to help—and her loving him so ! What would she have felt ? What would she have felt ?"

"She is saved that," said Rupert, his face rigid and grey. He waited until her agitation had subsided, and then persisted with his inquiries. "You heard nothing ? saw nothing ? have no suspicions ?"

Mrs. Wiggett shook her head. "Nothing," she repeated slowly, gazing into the fire. "I can say no more than that. I'm too deaf, and I was sleeping part of the

afternoon. It's a mystery, Mr. Rupert, and you'll make nothing of it."

He sat leaning towards the fire, which showed clearly the sternness of his set features, the bitter light of wrath and resolution in his eyes. Mrs. Wiggett stole glance after glance as if fascinated, and her trembling increased.

"You'll make nothing of it, Mr. Rupert," she murmured, guessing his unspoken thought.

"There are clever people called detectives who can find out even greater mysteries," he replied, without turning his head.

"Leave it to God and his conscience, whoever it is," she entreated, with quivering lips. "Don't meddle in it, Mr. Rupert! for *her* sake! What will it be but staining your own hands with a fellow creature's blood?" her eyes searched his face imploringly. "Oh, Mr. Rupert, keep your hands clean, for the love of heaven; vengeance does not belong to man."

"You don't quite understand," he said

Soothingly. "It is not vengeance, Wiggett; **i**t is simple justice. You are upset by the **s**hock, and I must leave you now."

Mrs. Wiggett said no more: she was **e**xhausted by this fresh agitation after the **d**istressing excitement of the last twenty-four hours, and subdued by Heathcote's **p**utting aside of the subject. She only **l**ooked after him wistfully as he left the **r**oom.

The evening had closed in dull and grey. **A** steady rain was falling when Rupert and **L**ewis went out. No word passed between **t**he two men as they walked to the end of **G**rove Terrace. Lewis strode doggedly **a**long, his hat over his eyes, his hands in **h**is pockets, withdrawn again into his blank **a**bstraction. Just as they reached the last **h**ouse, however, before turning the corner, **h**e raised his downcast face and cast a **s**wift glance at the upper bay-window. **A**s it happened, Rupert saw the glance, and it amazed him—so wild, so agonized, so yearning, and withal so despairing was it. He was not fanciful, and most assuredly he

was not sentimental, yet the hackneyed comparison of that look with the glance a lost being might give standing without the gate of Paradise, did just occur to him.

In answer to Lewis's inquiry, Thomas said that every one was upstairs, and Lewis, in the manner of one at home, ushered his companion into the brightly lighted dining-room.

"You won't care to see a lot of strangers," he said. "I'll send her down to you."

He shut the door, and Rupert was left alone, so he thought ; but as he was crossing the room, in instinctive course for the hearthrug, his eye was caught by a movement on his left, and he stopped and turned his head that way. A wide archway was cut in the wall of partition between the room in which he was and a smaller one behind, and the opening was draped by heavy curtains, one being then caught back. This inner room was unlighted, but a dim stream through the curtained

opening reached in for a yard or so and then lost itself in the shadows. In the semi-gloom Rupert saw a slight, darkly robed figure rise from a low chair. It stepped noiselessly out of the shadows, not unlike a shadow itself, except for the pale gleam of white hands and delicate face and throat, and stood between the heavy curtains.

Rupert in some perplexity bowed. Could *this* be his sister? But a recollection of rosy cheeks and golden hair darted in timely warning through his mind. No blue-eyed, fair-haired, tiny-limbed child could develop even in the space of seven years into a tall, stately, young Princess of shadows and mystery, with hair of night-like darkness framing in a pale, sadly proud face, out of which shone dark eyes of such wonderful intensity and depth.

"I beg your pardon. I fear I have intruded," he said.

"You have come to see Gussy," murmured Mildred.

"Yes. I am Rupert Heathcote," he

replied, acknowledging his identity with a certain cold hauteur.

She looked at him with earnest troubled eyes in which there lingered still something of the horror of yesterday's event : not an atom of self-consciousness was in the look, she had forgotten herself completely for once ; she was only full of sorrow and pity for those affected by this dreadful tragedy. For the moment she was shaken out of conventional restrictions, and did not reflect that they were mere strangers, and further, man and woman, and still further, brother and young—she breathed a truer atmosphere, and remembered only that he was the son of the man whose fate was so awful, and her heart beat with simple human fellowship and kindness.

"It is a terrible home-coming for you," she faltered, in low gentle tones of sympathy and feeling. "I—I am so sorry."

She had nearly offered her hand, but Rupert drew himself up and stiffly bent his head. The shock was still so fresh, the circumstances of his return and previous

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relations with his father were so painful and galling to his reserved fastidious nature, that an allusion was intolerable; sympathy, unpardonable presumption.

The faintest tinge of colour swept into the girl's pale cheeks. She had offered mere human sympathy and it had been repulsed: she, in spite of the sensitiveness fostered by her wounded pride at her position, had positively slipped conventional bondage for an instant and spoken naturally to a man. But *he* had not forgotten etiquette, as he had promptly shown her. "How could *I* ever dream of meeting a man on rational terms?" she said to herself scornfully. "What was I thinking of?"

"I will tell Gussy you are here," she said to Rupert, and with the slightest, stiffest inclination glided from the room.

Directly after came a rustle of silk, a waft of perfume, and a handsome, fresh-coloured lady, as great a contrast to the poetical vision he had just seen as could well be, confronted him. Mrs. Norton

rustled in out of the brightly lighted hall with the sweep of ample skirts, and then the glitter of ornaments, leaving the door wide open—an ordinary woman in ordinary evening dress. Shadows and soft dimness fled before her. She seemed to bring a fresh breeze from healthy every day life, and to Rupert was more welcome than the creature of shadows and noiseless movements who had first greeted him. Mildred was too much a part herself of the gloom and ghostliness into which he had plunged on his arrival at this place; her large eyes held a reflection of the very horror that was oppressing him, and filling the air he breathed. But this comely, kindly looking lady was a real substantial reminder of the happy commonplace and comfortable mundane interests. She clasped his hand with warm firm fingers, but though her eyes shone sympathetically into his—indeed, he fancied their brightness was dimmed for an instant by a quick-springing tear—she ventured on no spoken condolence.

"I *could* not," she told Mildred afterwards. "My little speech seemed frozen on my lips. I couldn't get out a word. He *looked* so—as if he defied me to say a syllable about his loss. If it had been Mr. Ingram, I should have felt no difficulty—I have always been able to speak quite freely to him, poor—er—— Was it *very* stupid of me, Mildred?"

"No, auntie dear, it was the wisest thing you could have done."

"You really think so? But if he thought me lacking in proper feeling—Fancy! not to say a word, and on such a very awful occasion."

"I am sure you were right," said Mildred soothingly, and she smiled a little bitterly as she added mentally, "I only wish *I* had read his expression to as much purpose as Aunt Adela."

Mrs. Norton began some rather embarrassed apologies. They were confused to incoherency, but Rupert soon discovered that she was making excuses for his sister.

"She would rather not see me?" he

said. It was putting it with a blunt frankness very trying to Mrs. Norton, who held fast to the decent make-believes which help the wheels of life to turn smoothly, and who could not help feeling guilty as she remembered Gussy's passionate, "I won't see him! Don't tell him I'm not well or make any excuse—say I *won't* go down!"

"She is so upset, poor child. Who can wonder? and really she hardly knows what she says or does—the shock—and so idolized as she always—she cannot bear the idea of seeing a strange face—of course," stammered poor Mrs. Norton, in a terrible state of confusion as she found herself tumbling into dangerous waters, "you are *not* a stranger, Mr. Rupert—Mr. Heathcote—but still in a sense you are, you see—and being wild with grief——"

Rupert smiled a faint hard smile, under the benumbing influence of which the lady's apologies and explanations broke down altogether. Really it was very trying, very trying indeed of Gussy!

Heathcote did not notice the effect of his smile. Perhaps it was inconsistent on his part, but he did wince a little under this slight. He had half contemplated treating his sister in as slighting a fashion, it is true, but now he saw with sudden and convincing clearness the whole objectionable character of a carelessness of appearances. His position was not an agreeable one; in no circumstances could it be pleasant to be made the victim of an open slight among strangers; and in the present state of things, it was simply unendurable. What sort of a girl could this sister of his be, to wreak this pitiful little piece of revenge upon him at such a time? Grief did drive people half crazy, he supposed; but surely it could not warp a nature completely.

"I understand," he said stiffly—and got no further, for down the stairs, seen well through the wide open door, came the dark-haired lady of shadows, and clinging to her, his erring sister, evidently.

"That's right, my dear!" exclaimed

Mrs. Norton, in great relief ; the impulsive tears springing to her eyes and falling brightly over. " I thought that perhaps if you really tried to make the exertion—— "

Mildred led Gussy into the room and put her gently forward. The girl clung to her hand, and from under her heavy swollen eyelids darted one glance, timid, defiant, ashamed, at the tall stranger.

" Mildred made me," she said, like a child, trying to pout and succeeding only in an hysterical sob.

Then Mildred disengaged herself, and laying a hand on her aunt's arm drew her gently from the room.

The brother and sister were left alone, and it would be hard to say which was more at a loss. Perhaps Rupert was, for Gussy took refuge in passive waiting, leaving the initiative to him. Her response to the announcement of his visit had not been of a kind to rouse the tenderest fraternal emotions, or even to prepossess Rupert in her favour ; but Gussy never needed any witness in her defence when she showed

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herself, and this evening she had all the additional power of looking deplorably pathetic. Her cheeks were stained with tears, her blue eyes were heavy with the floods they had shed, her lips trembled, and her bright hair was loosened about her temples and neck. As her brother looked at her standing there, with half averted head in shy embarrassment, he felt it was as absurd to be hurt by her behaviour as it would be to take a child's show of temper seriously to heart. Then a happy inspiration came to him—he put his arm round her and gently kissed the quivering lips.

"I won't let him kiss me," Gussy had vehemently declared again and again that afternoon to her friends, in the excitement caused by her brother's telegram and the startling prospect of his speedy arrival. "I don't feel that he is my brother—I hate him! He wasn't a good son to poor darling papa, and papa never liked him, so I shan't—I never could. Oh, why should he come at all? Why couldn't he keep away altogether after doing it for so

long? What right has *he* to come home? It's just as if he triumphed over poor darling papa," and Gussy sobbed wildly.

"My dear Gussy!" said Mrs. Norton, who was not given to extravagant fancies, "I really don't quite see how the very proper attention of—of coming home at this time can be exactly called *triumphing*."

"He has no right to pay proper attentions! I know *he* would rather not receive any attention from him! And it *isn't* his home—and won't be. He will only have to go away again directly."

"That," said Mrs. Norton, with an anxious sigh, "remains to be seen. He *may* stay, my dear; and in that case you would regret having—having not treated him with a little sisterly kindness." ("Really," she thought in desperation, "it is awkward all round. There never was such a provokingly delicate and trying situation.")

"Sisterly kindness! If he stays I shall die," cried Gussy. "But he shan't *kiss* me."

This determination to show a dignified

and severe front to her strange brother seemed to her heroic ; she had a vague idea that she was standing up for and guarding her father. The moment of putting her courageous resolution into force had come, but Gussy only burst into tears and involuntarily nestled within the arm put round her. She was so dependent upon the kindness and care of those near her ; she had felt so terribly deserted and desolate without her father's tender love and lavish caresses and petting, so frightened to think she must miss them "for ever," that she caught at the slightest semblance of a substitute.

"Oh, Rupert!" she sobbed, appealing to his sympathy and understanding.

The soft clinging of the little figure touched Rupert, and he held her closer. "Poor child," he murmured, and Gussy felt another kiss upon her brow. He drew her to the couch and sat down, still with his arm about her.

As Gussy's sobs grew calmer, she remembered the line of conduct she had

planned before. It was somewhat of a shock to find herself within the very arm of the enemy, her head upon his shoulder; but she excused herself for her weakness by reflecting that perhaps, after all, he might be nice—a chance remote to the verge of impossibility, of course; but it contented her for the present.

“I don’t know how to bear it,” she said, a great sob catching her breath. “I don’t know *how* to bear it. I have never had trouble before—and it came so suddenly, and — and — so awfully. Oh, Rupert, Rupert, why did it happen like that? I can’t bear to think of it—if only it had not been *so*! if only it had not been *so*!”

“Don’t think of that,” whispered Rupert, hardly able to bear this, so sharp was the pain because it had been “*so*.”

“How can I help it? It breaks my heart, and”—clinging convulsively to him—“it frightens me so.”

“Poor little thing!”

He did his best to soothe her, and soon she was calm, for Gussy’s bursts of sorrow

were so passionate that they exhausted themselves quickly. Besides, she was a great deal comforted at finding what she supposed to be a warm supply of family affection so unexpectedly placed at her service. Rupert was a close relation after all, and she was not left alone in the world ; and also, she was curious about him. To gratify this curiosity she moved away a little, and from under drooping lashes studied this specimen of what might be termed a hitherto unknown species. She had the vaguest and haziest notions possible about her brother and the life he led, supposing him to be quite a hero of the splendidly wild and delightfully wicked and recklessly dissipated type. He looked quiet enough certainly, but Gussy was not disappointed. "Those fast men always *do* look quiet," said she, in the confidence of her vast knowledge ; "quiet and languid. He is handsome and just in the right way," with an enthusiastic determination to make facts fit her theory. "He is *exactly* like a hero. I will ask Mildred if she doesn't

think the same. I wonder what he thinks of me."

Rupert ought to have been returning her scrutiny, but he was looking straight before him, and his face was both sad and stern. All at once a fit of shyness came over Gussy, and a return of her nervous terror. She wanted to be made to forget it; she resented the withdrawal of her brother's attention, and his personal absorption in their loss.

"I did not mean to come down, but Mildred said I ought to," she remarked with an injured pout.

"Who is Mildred?" asked Rupert, still abstracted.

"You saw her just now. She brought me to see you. I don't know why, but Mildred is strange sometimes. Mr. Norton says she is the strangest girl he ever knew."

"Mr. Norton is not her father," suggested Rupert, with a faint idea that this speech had not the true paternal ring in it.

"No. He is her uncle, but she will

never call him uncle, because he is so odious. Mrs. Norton is her aunt, and she is my friend," said Gussy.

"You see a great deal of each other," he remarked, but lamely, for it was an effort to bring his mind to common topics.

"Yes. Lewis is in love with her, you know."

"Ah!" indifferently. Then he remembered Lewis's glance at the upper window, and wondered. Could Lewis Ingram, of all men, be really capable of deep, strong feelings, such as those that were revealed then? This Mildred must be a magician.

"Poor Lewis!" sighed Gussy. "I wish he could marry her."

Rupert was surprised at her expressing interest in her friend's affairs just then.

"I could live with them," said Gussy.

"And you would like that?"

"Of course. I know them better than I know you."

"Very true." He regarded her with a dispassionate curiosity—was the little thrust intentional, or was she really as

childish as her face and sweet petulant voice ?

Gussy's lip quivered under the calm critical scrutiny ; it was so different, so sadly, appallingly different from what she was used to. She got up with a little air of spoilt-child dignity, and said tremulously, choking back her tears, " I will go back now. Good night."

And that night as she lay in Mildred's bed, she sobbed over her brother's formidable coldness and stiffness. " If *he* is to take care of me, I shall never be happy again. Of course, I never shall be, how is it possible ? But I shall be still more wretched with him ; he has no kindness, like poor darling papa. He looked at me so strangely once. At first I thought he might be nice, but now I am quite, quite sure he is not. Oh, papa, why have you left me to people who won't love me as you did ?"

CHAPTER X.

"YOU ARE NO HEROINE."

" I FEEL awfully anxious about this will," said Mr. Norton, on Saturday morning, " awfully anxious. I admit that I am impatient to learn how things stand. This state of uncertainty isn't fit for a dog ; one is quite in the dark. I shall stay after the funeral and hear the will read, Addie, my love."

It was after breakfast, and he lay on his back on the dining-room couch, one knee thrown over the other and one foot sawing the air, smoking an enormous cigar, his hands clasped beneath his head. Gussy was in Mildred's room, but it by no means followed that Mr. Norton would have

spoken less plainly had she been present — the obligations of good taste not pressing heavily upon him. He was rather a small man, with dark, bead-like, restless eyes, a round, highly-coloured face, and a shock of untidy brown hair. He had a way of fixing his eyes gravely, even solemnly, upon the person to whom he was speaking, and a trick of drawing his brows fiercely together and of closing his lips tightly after the remarks he desired to emphasize with the greatest impressiveness. His movements were nearly as restless as his eyes; it appeared a physical impossibility for him to remain in the same attitude for two consecutive minutes. Even now, though prostrate, he was not still: one foot waved ever, or he took his hands from under his head and thrust them into his pockets, or he jerked himself to one side and then to the other, or else he trifled with his handkerchief, and so on through an infinite variety of twistings and turnings, and then *da capo*.

A shower of rain was falling, and the

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young Nortons' tempers had suffered acutely on its account. After having growled and sparred together a little while in the window, in sulky indecision about obeying their stepmother's order to stay indoors, they interrupted her reply to their father by an abrupt and noisy choice of rebellion. Briefly remarking that "it was beastly staying in," Rollo rushed to the door, followed by his brothers.

"Oh, my dears, do wait at least till this shower is over," cried Mrs. Norton.

"Let them go!" shouted her husband. "Let them go, Addie, my love! They shan't be coerced;" and at the sound of the clamorous exit he chuckled with paternal pride. "There's spirit for you—there's blood! They're Nortons, every inch of them."

To be a Norton was, in Mr. Norton's opinion, to be the possessor of every excellence worth having. He believed himself to be descended from an old and illustrious family, and was inordinately proud of this distinction. His ideas of

the characteristics of blue blood were perhaps a little peculiar; boisterousness, a sublime frankness, a contemptuous disregard of others and of conventional usages, being looked upon by him as unmistakable signs of good family in himself and his three sons. It pleased him to declare that the Norton blood would not brook control, but his gratification on the score of this incapacity was hardly shared by his neighbours. In politics he was staunchly Conservative, or rather, a bigoted Tory, declaring that the glory of England had vanished with the breaking up of the feudal system. It is needless to add that he despised all who differed from him. A man was a Radical, he was wont to say, either from ignorance or wilful rascality. This may seem a hard saying, but Mr. Norton was not in the habit of measuring his words. The Norton blood was impetuous, and claimed a licence of speech very often disconcerting in the extreme to those whose inferiority of race trammelled them with mean-spirited restrictions.

"I don't deny that I feel anxious," repeated Mr. Norton, when the boys had gone, raising his voice to be heard above the banging of the doors. "But still, at the same time I don't think there can be any need really to *fear*; the old banker wouldn't have taken any steps in favour of his son. Don't go, Mildred—you needn't do. You must feel awfully anxious too."

"I beg your pardon. You are quite mistaken," she said icily.

"Now, what consummate folly and pretence," burst out Mr. Norton, while his life trembled; for, as she often said to him, she dreaded any encounter between Mr. Norton and Mildred. "As if—here! she's gone! What a temper the girl has! I expect," he added, more quietly and chuckling, "she knows how well it suits her. Trust a girl for studying to be becoming! I never saw a woman get up better. I've a good mind—though I don't think it'll be necessary, as she's sure to be cut out—I've a good mind to put this new-comer up to the dodge,

The first flare-up would bowl him over completely," said Mr. Norton, with, it must be confessed, a somewhat indiscriminate use of the figure of metaphor. "She's a splendid girl, is Mildred, splendid! although I must own I can't understand her. I only hope young Ingram will be able to do things on the square."

"You don't really think there is any fear of—of his not being able to come forward?" said Mrs. Norton, not because she had any confidence in her husband's judgment, but because her anxiety craved a reassuring word, however unauthoritative and ill-considered.

"Don't you be afraid, Addie, my love; you'll find it will be all right," with cheering encouragement. "I think better of the old banker than to suppose him capable of turning round to his son. I'll not deny that he was queer, but I give him credit for better feeling. Besides, what time has there been for making changes?—and that hint he dropped to me most probably meant nothing. I know at the

time I thought nothing of it. I'm too keen-sighted to be easily imposed upon; we Nortons are a shrewd crew, awfully shrewd. As an old friend of mine once said to me, 'Norton,' said he—it was young Rucker; you must have heard me speak of young Rucker, Septimus Rucker?"

Mrs. Norton had indeed, though she was unable to give the exact number of times.

"As young Rucker said to me one day—I remember we were walking along the Strand together, and I had been saying something—I really forget now what it was."

"Something clever and amusing, I've no doubt," said his wife good-humouredly.

"Ha! ha! very good! Yes, I've no doubt it was. I was noted for my sayings in my young days. We Nortons are witty fellows——"

"And what did young Rucker say?"

"'Norton,' said he, 'Norton, what a fellow you are!' I remember it perfectly—I know he was awfully impressed."

Mrs. Norton laughed with practised complaisance.

"I shall stay after the funeral and hear the will," said Mr. Norton, abruptly returning to his first subject.

"Do you think—" began his wife, hesitatingly.

Mr. Norton rolled himself to a sitting position, and confronted her with his most impressive frown.

"I owe it to myself to learn the position of those two young men at the earliest possible date," he declaimed. "I feel that I am in the position of Mildred's guardian, and I consider myself bound to look after her interests. I'm the last man in the world to shrink from a duty, however—however painful. I am conscientious to a fault. No man living has a keener sense of responsibility than I have—if as keen."

Like lesser mortals, he was subject to the weakness of dignifying his curiosity by high-sounding terms and motives.

Mrs. Norton said no more ; opposition

was futile, if not dangerous, for Mr. Norton swayed the sceptre of domestic tyranny, temper. She hoped he would forget his determination, or at all events not carry it into effect. But later in the day, Mr. Norton once more expressed his intention of hearing the will. He was preparing to attend the funeral, a ceremony in which only his reverence for wealth and his sense of the boundless honours due to a man sanctified by worldly success, induced him to take part, for he was, in his own words, "a great foe to anything gloomy;" and it seemed to him only just that he should have the indemnification of hearing the will. Scruples about intrusion could not occur to him. It never entered Mr. Norton's head that his presence could be at any time and in any circumstances unwelcome: any interest he deigned to take in a man and a man's affairs was an honour. And he was incapable of seeing a hint. Therefore, as he had decided that his responsibilities as the head of the family, demanded from him the sacrifice of appeas-

ing his curiosity directly, getting his own way was as good as done.

Mrs. Norton, with an anxious heart, saw him in his new suit of black step with majestic and portentous gloom into his carriage. She had as much confidence in the discretion of his demeanour and actions as a mother has in the good behaviour of a wayward, unruly child when out of her sight; but poor Mrs. Norton had long ago sought comfort in the reflection that "every one knew what Mr. Norton was." To some wives the fact that their husband's "ways" were matter of general knowledge might not have proved consolatory, but to Mrs. Norton's easy good nature submission to the unavoidable was soothing.

"I wish he had not taken it into his head to stay after the funeral," she thought. "They may not like it; they are sure to want the reading to be as private as possible. Mr. Rupert Heathcote does not appear the sort of man to have liberties taken with him; and when one considers everything, how trying it will be for him to

be passed over—really, there does seem a want of good taste in an outsider's pushing himself in. However, Mr. Ingram won't think anything of Mr. Norton behaving so—he knows what he is, and will not suppose that Mildred and I have anything to do with it. Poor Mildred! I saw she was severely tried when Mr. Norton announced his intention of staying; she feels those things so dreadfully, poor child!"

She shook her head as she went back to the shaded drawing-room, where Gussy sat in state in all the dignity of new crape, exacting constant attention and homage to her grief from her friends. They must think of her and only of her; they must with their society and talk keep her from her sorrow. She held Mildred's hand and gave little convulsive squeezes to the passive fingers, and shuddered again and again as she buried her face in the deep-bordered handkerchief at the thought of what was even then going on. Mildred would kiss her and murmur a kind word,

but she was tired in body, her mind was full of distracting perplexities and painful thoughts, and Gussy's demonstrations wore her nerves and harassed spirits.

Her aunt's re-entrance was some relief, bringing, as it did, a sharer of the burden of supplying support and condolence. Mrs. Norton was better able to deal with the situation. The arm she put round the poor petulant child was comforting and motherly, her tears would come in free sympathy, and her words were many and untiring. But that gloomy afternoon was a great strain upon Mrs. Norton too. She would very much have liked to be able to brood over her anxieties undisturbed, and her own wish suggested that Mildred must have the same desire and with far greater reason.

"You look tired, my dear," she said once. "Go and lie down, and Harriet shall take you some tea."

"Oh, don't go away, Mildred," cried Gussy. "I want every one to be with me. It is so awful—I can't bear to be alone."

"You won't be alone. I will stay with

you," said Mrs. Norton gently, making Mildred a sign to go, as she might have done had Gussy been a fractious baby.

It was like Mildred to baffle her kindly scheme, she thought. But the girl's sore chafed heart resented the solicitude that implied her personal share in the day's trouble, her need for consideration and gentle treatment.

"I don't care to lie down," she said coldly, straightening her weary figure.

"We will have tea early," said Mrs. Norton, with a sigh. "It will do us all good—and you especially, my poor dear," to her charge.

"I couldn't *touch* anything," declared Gussy. "Oh, Mrs. Norton, do you—do you—think it is—over yet?"

Mrs. Norton looked at her watch. "Yes, dear," she whispered; "he is at rest now."

And Gussy wept and wept.

Only a few minutes after Mildred rose and stole away. She went to her bedroom and shut herself in. For a little

while she paced up and down, her hands locked together, her breath coming quickly. The suspense in the air, the confusion, the others' frank anxiety, were all intolerable; and all the more intolerable because try as she might she could not pretend that she was unaffected, that she was indifferent. The suspense *did* affect her—in every throbbing nerve, in every pulse of her sore, proud, unhappy heart;—but not as the others imagined. Her aunt trembled for Lewis Ingram's chances, and believed that she did too.

“She gives me credit for some feeling,” said Mildred bitterly. “She would hardly believe me if I told her that either way he has no chance. But I want him to have the money; oh, I want it with all my heart! Then, *then*, I shall almost win back my self-respect when I say no.” For, although she suffered the effects of suspense, she had no real doubt of the event; a surface anxiety only was in her mind, a recognition of the general uncertainty of things. She did not actually consider the

possibility that Lewis might not be the heir ; in fact, she could not, she durst not.

But in the anticipation of refusing in him a wealthy and worldly match, she even found a fierce sort of comfort. Her repentance for the weakness of that moment's glamour in the field that golden evening, a weakness she had herself wilfully invited, was vehemently bitter. It had been the culmination of her wavering doubts and dallying with temptation ; and its dangerous encouragement, its committing of herself, drove her almost frantic with defiance and fear. She shrank from the first thought of any claim upon her being in this lover's hands—and the shrinking gave her a vivid realization of what marriage without love meant. She would not be bound by an impulse, an instant's deception only half-unconscious. She would get free once and for all of her voluntarily inflicted mortifications, the ignominious balancing between her nobler and her lower self ; she would be true to her own heart at least, and refuse this mercenary

marriage. In some ways it would be a hard thing to do, for he was so infatuated, she thought, with a pity given with a grudging she was ashamed of, but in other ways it would be easy. And she longed to be free from the shackles of this old self-treachery ; longed to look a man in the face again with recovered self-respect and pride.

“Oh, I have been weak and foolish—worse,” she groaned. “How could I do it? how could I lower myself? how could I give in to the others and be false to the little good there is in me? I will be so no more. He may reproach me—I deserve reproaches—I have treated him abominably ; he shall say all the hard things he likes and I will listen. He cannot blame me more than I blame myself, however angry he may be.”

He had every right to be angry—every right to heap reproaches upon her ; she had herself given him this right ; but we do not think gently of those whom we have injured, and Mildred made these acknow-

ledgments not humbly and regretfully, but with defiance, the pride that will not stoop to ask for mercy, but rather chooses punishment in full.

She heard Mr. Norton's return, a strangely quiet return though it was for him ; heard the opening and shutting of a door or two ; guessed that her aunt had contrived to leave Gussy for a moment to hasten to hear the news, and tried to shut her ears to any sounds in the house, tried to convince herself that she had no interest in that day's bringing forth. Her position was unbearable. Her aunt would be seeking her in careful promptness to relieve her suspense, thus shattering the flimsy pretence of indifference which she was trying to keep up in her own eyes. Should she baulk this private communication by going back to Gussy ? Before her even Mr. Norton's freedom of speech, whether of congratulation or of condolence—how her ears burned !—must be kept in check. But nothing did keep him in check ; she could not count upon a touch of good taste

or good feeling on his part ; and she felt it impossible to bear his comments just at first. Yet if she stayed in her room, she ran the risk of attracting even more attention ; it would be taken as a proof of her personal interest in Lewis Ingram's affairs. The situation was insupportable ! and she owed it all to her own carelessness, her own unfaithfulness to her better nature, she declared in a frenzy of shame and self-contempt. The room seemed to stifle her. On a sudden impulse she caught up her hat and with shaking fingers began putting it on. Her hands were just raised to secure it below the heavy coil of hair behind, when a soft tap came at the door.

The slight sound sent a shock through Mildred : it was too late to escape, and she turned to face her aunt with a desperate hunted look like one at bay. Then as soon as she had done so, she rounded back again on her heel in a last poor attempt to show non-expectation. She tried to say carelessly that she was going out, but

her lips were dry and her tongue seemed paralyzed.

Mrs. Norton, after closing the door cautiously, sank upon the first chair, and Mildred heard a sob and knew that her aunt was crying.

"I can't help it," she faltered. "I wouldn't let Mr. Norton see me—it would vex him so if I appeared to have any regrets; but as I came upstairs after he told me, it seemed to come over me how cruelly sad and disappointing it all was, and I—I could not help bursting into tears. I hurried up to you at once before going back to that poor child. She will be missing me, and I dare not stay more than a second, but I thought I must let you hear it privately, so that you could get over the—the——"

"Aunt Adela, Mr. Heathcote's will has nothing to do with me," said Mildred in clear incisive accents. "The way in which his money is left will not affect my actions in the least. I have made up my mind. I want you to understand that."

Mrs. Norton's tears stopped. "I might have known it," she said to herself, with the tragic calm of despair. "She *has* accepted him."

"Oh, Mildred," she cried reproachfully, "how can you be so rash and obstinate? Do you mean to break my heart? For Heaven's sake don't let any foolish high-flown nonsense about being true to a man, no matter what his fortune is, ruin your chances. You can easily draw back," eagerly; "we have been treated very badly, as Mr. Norton says. He is furious at finding how completely we have been deceived—simply furious! And really for once I must say he has reason. We had no idea how grossly we were being imposed upon."

Mildred had fastened her hat, but her attitude with arms upraised and fingers touching at the back of her neck, was arrested by her aunt's speech, and she remained motionless, staring at the reflection of her own whitening face in the glass, meeting the growing dismay which stared back at her out of her own dilated eyes.

"And the only comfort *is* that we have learned the truth in time. As Mr. Norton says, it is a most providential escape, and we cannot be too thankful. But you will go and spoil it all, Mildred, if you take any nonsensical romance into your head *now*."

Mildred suddenly laughed; a hard, mirthless little sound it was, and her arms dropped heavily at her sides. "Don't scoff at me too unmercifully, auntie," she said.

"My dear! I—scoff at you?"

"I take nonsensical romance into my head?" mocked Mildred. "But tell me the drift of the will, then you can spare your eloquence. I shall know all you would say."

"The son gets all," said Mrs. Norton in a whisper.

"Auntie—*no*!" broke from the girl's white lips.

"Is it not too bad?" said Mrs. Norton, struggling with prudence and real grief for Lewis. Her sympathy for him, warm

as it was, had been thrust aside by the terrible fear suggested by Mildred's first speech, but it returned as she told the story. If Mildred was really going to act rationally then she might safely indulge in her regrets. "After Lewis Ingram being to him as a son all these years, he only gets £6000. Gussy has her fortune, £30,000 ; there are legacies to the servants and the lawyer, and Mr. Rupert gets the rest. I don't understand it—Mr. Norton confesses himself fairly dumfounded. In fact, it seems to have come like a thunderbolt upon everybody. The will was only signed the day he—was taken. Is it not strange?"

"And he will be poor?" said Mildred slowly. She had not been listening to her aunt.

"What is £6000? Of course there is his situation at the bank, but even then——"

She came to the toilet table and caught sight of the reflection in the glass. "Oh, Mildred, my dear child, what is it? I had

no idea that you really *cared*—oh, my poor dear, this is awful!" Aghast and distressed she tried to put her arm round Mildred's waist, but the girl drew herself away.

"Don't," she said hoarsely. "I don't need sympathy."

"Don't take it to heart," sobbed Mrs. Norton.

"I can't—I haven't a heart."

"Oh, my dear!"

"What have *I* to do with it?" flashed out Mildred. "Why do you speak as if it mattered to *me*?"

"If only I could be sure it did not," faltered her aunt.

"You *may* be sure." Then she added in a dull sort of way: "I am going out. Don't stay, Aunt Adela, Gussy will want you."

"Yes, my dear." The poor bewildered lady went meekly to the door. "Oh, Mr. Ingram said something to Mr. Norton about coming to bid us good-bye later this evening. He must be going away for a change. You will not be long, Mildred?"

"No; I will come back in time."

"Put something over your dress, dearest; there is a thick mist coming in from the sea."

"Very well," came mechanically.

Mrs. Norton left her, and Mildred went to the wardrobe and took down a light grey cloak, because it was easier to follow her aunt's direction than to exert any will of her own. With the cloak wrapped about her, she ran downstairs and out into the thickening mist. It was coming in rapidly, and Mildred walked down the slope to the beach where it was densest and whitest, and would enshroud her better from all eyes. And there she paced up and down the heavy sands with something of the maddened impatience of a wild creature entrapped.

She had seen her way almost exultantly before, but *now*? Oh, it was hard! it was hard! Every untoward circumstance conspired to humiliate and mortify her—there was no chance for her to assert unworldliness and womanly pride—none! none!

Everything was against her rising from the level to which she had so weakly allowed herself to sink.

Yet this time, in deciding rightly she would be commended as doing well; and the miserable consciousness that Lewis's poverty did make a difference to her, added to her self-contempt. What she had discovered to be impossible when believing him to be a rich man, was doubly, trebly impossible now she knew him to be poor. She did not disguise the truth, nor attempt any palliation of it: she shrank from poverty; she shrank from Lewis and all the extra demands upon her kindness which his low estate would involve.

And the dilemma of such an ingenious complication of mortifications hardened her towards him. She had given him a weapon against herself—or rather, it had been wrongfully wrested from her—and the advantage it put into his hands made her feel pitiless. He was coming this evening, he would use all the rights of his imaginary victory—call upon her sympathy and—

Heaven help her! her love—implore her patience and faithfulness, talk of mutual trust—all the sweet simple talk of things of which she had no experience—and torture her by his belief in her trueness of heart and her return of his affection. The very desperation of the situation gave her strength to free herself sharply and completely—she had no compunction now, no ruth for any pain to him: her own sore difficulty left no room for pity—she was angry with him because of his claim upon her, because of the disillusioning he would experience.

CHAPTER XI.

FAREWELL.

THE thick mist darkened the evening much earlier ; it was twilight when Mildred dragged her weary feet back to the house.

As she opened the front door, Lewis was descending the stairs, having just said his farewells to the others. His deep mourning made the paleness and haggardness of his face more noticeable, seen in the full light of the gas in the hall. His eyes had wakened from their blank abstraction and were restless with the expectation of dreaded suffering.

When the slim grey figure appeared, he started, even stopped, and then came slowly and reluctantly towards her. They met before the dining-room door, but

neither offered a hand. Both were agitated; only Mildred's agitation partook more of the nature of excitement. Her head was high; her eyes were brilliant and hard, as of one on the defensive.

"I was afraid I should miss you," said Lewis.

"No. Aunt told me that you were coming."

She preceded him into the dining-room, and stood just outside the stream of light which fell through the open doorway. There should be no show of avoidance. She waited, erect and still, slowly drawing off her right glove, her lips pressed firmly together, only her eyelids drooping.

"I came to say good-bye," said Lewis, after scanning the cold, still face, with a sort of despairing anguish of appeal.

"You are going away for a change? How long is your holiday to be?" bracing herself in ruthless desperation as she heard him close the door.

"I didn't mean that," patiently. "It is not a holiday—it is for always."

She stood silent in cold, hard expectancy. An assumption of unconsciousness, ordinary expressions of ordinary friendly regret, would have been the shallowest of mockeries. Too much was between them for her to take refuge behind the flimsy barrier of mere indifference, even had she been calm enough to think of any such refuge. Their agitation thrilled the very air around, and rent away conventional pretences.

"I am going to leave Thornlea. I am going away for altogether," said Lewis.

Something in his tone, some settled hopelessness, surely foreign to the expected key of passionate entreaty, brought a momentary glance from Mildred. She waited, almost holding her breath.

"I shall most probably never come in your way again," said Lewis, in a metallic lifeless voice, his eyes growing dull and stony, as no sign of kindness or of sorrow came from her.

She put up her hands to the fastening of her cloak; the sudden aching contraction

of her throat seemed as if it would choke her. Words, even had she known what words to speak, were just then physically impossible.

Lewis followed the movement of the white slender fingers in the stupefied apathy which had benumbed in its chill despair his first agitation and acute suffering.

"I have only to say 'good-bye,'" he added blankly, after a little pause.

Another silence, then Mildred sank upon a chair, and covered her face with her hands. She crouched thus, hiding her face in a paroxysm of self-scorn, remorse and pity. He *needed* no disillusioning from her; he understood her, he was not deceived. And he was too generous to ask anything from her. He would take himself and his poverty away out of her sight, knowing that his chances were hopeless. The bitterness of this forbearance ate into her very heart, and made her writhe and hide her face from him. She felt unutterably mean. She

could not say a word to comfort him. The only way in which she could have repaired the wrong to him and to her own soul was by declaring, "I love you." That might not be, and his injury, the injury of which her worldliness and careless trifling were guilty, rose up sternly between them, forbidding from her even the kindly regrets of a friend.

"My life is spoilt. I can only go away and hide myself," said Lewis drearily.

"Don't!" came from her in a stifled moan. "Don't say that."

"It is true."

"Oh no, no! It is not true! Why should your life be spoilt? It all lies before you."

"Oh, heavens, I hope not," he groaned, as if involuntarily.

"It is not spoilt. It must not be spoilt," she said passionately, disclosing a pale tear-wet face. "I haven't said a word about—about—the way you have been treated. Forgive me! forgive me! I

am sorry." She looked at him entreatingly, pityingly, timidly.

His miserable gaze dwelt hungrily upon every line of the lovely, quivering face, where the large tears were falling fast and unnoticed. It seemed as if he could not look enough.

"I thought you must be sorry," he said brokenly.

The simple words showing his expectation, and the surprise at its first non-fulfilment, carried to her ears the sharpest reproach, and the tears fell faster.

Lewis suddenly averted his head. "Don't—don't!" he cried, with a sharp-drawn sob. "I can't bear that."

He struggled to regain composure, and then turned back with a drawn look of pain as of one who has reached the limit of endurance.

"I must go. I shall always remember that you—you were sorry for me at the last." He drew lingeringly a step nearer. "Will you remember that I love you that I shall always love you in spite

the pain? Oh, Mildred! I have loved you so!" He came still nearer to her as she sat trembling and overcome. He stooped, lower, still lower. She thought he was going to kiss her, she was about to raise her face to let him take his wish; but he only bent over without touching her, and she could make nothing of his despairing, agonized, "Oh, Mildred! Mildred!"

There is no knowing what she might have done, in the wild pity of that moment, had not a ring at the door startled them. Mildred dashed away her tears, and got upon her feet. Lewis went a little apart from her; and hardly had they taken these precautions when Rupert Heathcote was ushered in.

His entrance was the most jarring of discords to both, and the gentleman himself was hardly less conscious of the inopportunity of his appearance. He had come to see Gussy, partly because it seemed the proper thing to do, and partly to make some inquiry about her plans for

the next week or two, as he was returning to London that night. It needed only a glance to show him that he had interrupted a scene of some tender nature, and his regret was unfeigned, while, to say the truth, his curiosity was slightly stirred. He showed no embarrassment, however, trying as was the situation, but bowed gravely to Mildred, who looked to his fancy more like a lady of shadows than ever in the long grey cloak, and in the dim half-light. She was a part of the ghostly mist this evening as she had been a part of the horror and darkness when he saw her first. "What is the precise relation between the two?" he wondered. Was this lady of shadows and mist actually what is vulgarly called "in love" with a man of Ingram's superficial qualities? There were unmistakable traces of great agitation on her delicate face, the glisten of a tear even now in the proud dark eyes which looked at him so haughtily, almost defiantly. "My intrusion is resented," he thought, and then another idea struck

him which invested the situation with a peculiarly piquant and fascinating element of interest. Was his intrusion on the scene, taken in a wider sense, resented still more deeply? Had his entrance on the Salthurst stage really come between this graceful, poetical-looking creature and the gratification of her ambition or of her love? He remembered Gussy's confidences on Thursday, and was fain to believe that he had unwittingly interfered with one or with both. If she did care for Lewis, it seemed a pity; if not, if her disappointment were only for the baulking of a worldly marriage, then Rupert felt there would be no need to waste sympathy or regret—he might resign himself with undisturbed equanimity to the part fate had assigned to him. But a flash of interest came into his grey eyes as he looked at her more attentively and thought how she must dislike him whatever was the way in which he had upset her plans.

Perhaps Mildred noticed that light in

the glance which was all at once so keenly observant, for she drew up her head. Rupert Heathcote was the last person she would have been seen by just then—the very last. Mr. Norton himself could not have been so unwelcome—his frank comments so unendurable as that quick glance. She met it with a cool blankness, all softness driven from her expression, and with a murmur about telling Gussy, passed him and left the room.

The two men had not seen each other since the reading of the will, for Lewis had departed to his own room and had busied himself in sorting and burning letters and papers, and in packing, and they faced each other now with a mute inquiry, a sort of examination.

“*Vive le roi!*” cried Lewis mockingly, with a theatrical wave of the hand.

Heathcote's brows drew together, but he smoothed them again directly. In his new dignity, all his rights as son and heir acknowledged and confirmed, he felt with

all the calmness of one whose position is assured and unshakable, that rivalry existed no longer between him and Lewis. He could make allowance for the anger and insolence of frustrated hopes, although he was not disposed to allow a longer life to the old familiarity of their dislike than was contained in the first few moments of defeat. Henceforth they were strangers, or at most indifferent acquaintances.

"Robert tells me you intend leaving Salthurst to-night?" he remarked, and there was the cool composure of conscious power and authority in his voice and manner which brought a dangerous light to Lewis's eyes.

"Robert's word may always be relied upon. It may interest you to know that he is truthful, as you are plunging into domestic life," said Lewis, with frank insolence, finding a reckless pleasure in throwing aside his late restraint. "I do leave Salthurst to-night. I have just been saying farewell here. You come

in happy time to receive my last words and blessing."

"What do you mean?"

"I shall return no more—no more!" cried Lewis, almost as if drunk or mad with misery and hatred, in the sudden revulsion after his farewell to Mildred. "The shades of Salthurst, Opplestone, etc., etc., will know me never again!"

"You give up the bank?"

"I do. Accept my resignation—I was forgetting business forms. Perhaps you will excuse, as the circumstances are peculiar, any formal notice."

"Do you think it is wise to throw away a good situation?" suggested Rupert. "I have heard that they are not always to be had for the wanting," he added, with the air of one making a merely general remark.

"You wish to remind me that beggars should not be choosers?"

Rupert pressed his lips together with a look of cold disgust.

"I think," said Lewis, his face darken-

ing passionately, "that you and I should hardly hit it off as master and servant."

"Oh, as to that," with a shrug of his shoulders, "you need have no fear. I should not come in your way."

"Do you think I *could* stay?" burst out Lewis violently. "Good heavens, man! What do you take me for? Do you suppose that I shall do anything but put as many miles as I can between me and these hated places where I have been cajoled and befooled? That I can have any wish but to rid myself of the memory of these years of degrading favouritism, during which I have enjoyed the enviable privilege, the honourable distinction, of serving as a tool for caprice, an unneeded bone of contention between a quarrelsome father and son? Do you suppose I have any aim but to forget the very name of Heathcote?"

"Ah?" said Rupert, roused and speaking with cool disdain. "That is the way you look at it, is it? You think you have been befooled? May I ask what you expected?"

Lewis's lips whitened, and he clenched his hand.

"I have got a great deal more than I expected," he said between his teeth. "I have got *freedom!*" laughing harshly. "Freedom and a holiday! I am the luckiest man alive! My servitude is over, and I am pensioned for the rest of my life. I don't refuse my pension," he said fiercely. "When a man's life has been spoilt for him by another's caprice, when he is maimed, so that he cannot work, he may fairly receive compensation, I think, even though it be as bitter as death to accept it. I have borne the burdens and duties of a son for seven years, some acknowledgment after all is but just. I have stayed in one place and quietly drudged; it is now *my* turn to be idle and to see the world"—he broke off, the wild hatred and defiance dying out of his face as his glance was caught by something beyond Rupert.

"Have you any more to say?" demanded the other in low clear tones of biting contempt.

But Lewis only made a mechanical gesture for silence. Heathcote turned sharply and saw that Mildred had just re-entered the room. She looked startled, even frightened, at the menacing attitudes of the two men, the bitter voices full of repressed passion and fury, and Heathcote mentally anathematized Ingram for his hot-headed inconsideration in bringing about such a scene at that time and place. He bit his lip and walked away a step, leaving to Lewis the onus of explanation and apology.

But Lewis only hurried past Mildred, muttering some inarticulate word or two, and left the house. Mildred advanced a little, hesitating, and slightly embarrassed, as she hardly knew how to give a message to a man who had drawn himself aside in such forbidding reserve.

“Mr. Heathcote——”

Rupert quickly turned, and the formidable frown left his face in an instant. He was gravely courteous.

“I beg your pardon?”

"Gussy has a headache and is lying down; she wishes you to go up to her, if you will. Only my aunt and Mr. Norton are with her in the drawing-room," added Mildred at the end of the message, which she had delivered in the most formal and perfunctory fashion. Pre-occupied as he was with the angry echo of Ingram's taunts and sneers, Rupert noticed this, and was quick to understand that she disliked the office she had undertaken, or been forced to undertake. Quite as formally, he consented to go upstairs.

Mrs. Norton received him at the drawing-room door, and clasped his hand with an expressive and happy mixture of grave congratulation and condolence; then led him to Gussy, who lay among cushions on the couch, tired out to calmness, heavy-eyed, and confusedly wretched. She received her brother's kiss in passive silence, merely putting her handkerchief to her eyes to brush away the slow hot tears which came at the thought of the contrast

between her father's lavish fondness and this grave brother's cold duty-salutes—for Gussy was sorely disappointed about the will and Lewis's departure, and quite sure that she would never be happy again, and never be able to endure the intruder who had upset so many plans.

Mr. Norton was in a wonderfully suppressed condition for him, which was partly caused by uneasiness at the decorous requirements of sorrow, and partly by the solemnizing awe he experienced in the presence of that very important personage, the heir. For once he refrained from monopolizing the greater part of the talk, contributing to the gravity of the occasion chiefly vast and breezy sighs, or deep appalling utterances between a groan and a cough.

Heathcote's visit was brief and of a purely business character. He was returning to London that night. Grove House would be shut up, and the servants were to go to Thornlea also that evening. He would probably make a stay there

himself shortly. He wished to know whether Gussy——

“Oh, you must let your sister stay with us!” cried kind Mrs. Norton, before he got any further. “Of course she stays with us until, at least, you come to Thornlea. That is arranged. Is it not, dear?” to Gussy.

“You are very kind.” He looked at Gussy too.

She raised herself on her elbow. “What else did you suppose I should do?” she demanded.

“I was going to suggest that Robert should escort you to Hastings on Monday to stay with Aunt Eleanor. I have an invitation for you.”

“Aunt Eleanor!” Gussy shuddered visibly and buried her face in her cushion.

Mrs. Norton looked embarrassed; Mr. Norton coughed with terrible force; and the faintest little smile touched Mildred's grave lips. She sat apart, her head bent over a piece of work, as if she took no interest in the talk going on.

Heathcote was annoyed by his sister's frank disgust at his proposition, and his expression was by no means conciliatory. Mr. Norton came gallantly to the rescue.

"Your sister naturally shrinks from the thought of strangers under the h'm—ah—*ahem*—and I conclude that, as we have not seen or heard anything of the lady you allude to as Aunt Eleanor, she is virtually a stranger to your sister."

"Of course she is!" came muffled from the cushion.

This testimony to his sagacity pleased Mr. Norton.

"I thought I could not be mistaken. Mr. Heathcote, I rarely am. My perspicacity is never at fault. But about your sister. She is like me, I fancy——"

Here Mildred could not help an inclination to an hysterical fit of laughter, and had to set her teeth on her lip to restrain herself. It was hard on Gussy to be championed so ardently by Mr. Norton.

"Keenly sensitive. I am sensitive to a fault, Mr. Heathcote, and I have found it

a great drawback. Such extreme sensitiveness brings its own suffering."

"When will he work round to the point?" wondered Rupert impatiently.

After dilating to some length upon his own sensitiveness, Mr. Norton once more remembered Gussy, and the point towards which his discursive remarks had originally been designed to tend.

"She is sensitive, and would, I am sure, prefer to be *at present* among friends—intimate friends—with whom she could feel herself *perfectly* at home. I mean no disrespect to the lady you allude to as Aunt Eleanor. Any one must see that your sister will feel more at home, and freer to unbend to—to—the exigencies of grief with intimate friends, than she could possibly be with a stranger, even though a relation. We shall be delighted to have Gussy—have no fear on that score, Mr. Heathcote. I am an awfully hospitable man. I go in for lavish hospitality, within reasonable limits, that is, of course, you understand. And my wife's niece is your sister's great

friend, you know ; she will be charmed to have her friend in the house," with a very perceptible glance of significance at his wife's niece.

Mildred responded at once to the call for a proper show of friendship. "Yes, I shall be very glad," she said, looking kindly at Gussy.

So it was arranged.

"We shall leave Salthurst ourselves almost at once," said Mr. Norton. "The place is spoilt for us—er— After all, I shan't be sorry to be at home again. I'm an awful man for my own place, am I not, Addie, my love? I agree with the song, 'There's no place like home.'"

This, considering certain recent events affecting two of his audience, was not the happiest choice of a theme. Gussy began to cry, but unobtrusively.

Mildred left her distant seat, and came towards the group near Gussy's couch. She had picked up a sheet of note-paper from the table, and this—to her aunt's astonishment—she gave with the plea-

santest of smiles to Mr. Norton. Mildred!—who never, if she could help it, addressed Mr. Norton of her own accord.

“Talking of songs, you must see the latest effort of Percy’s muse,” said Mildred, resting her hand for an instant on the back of Mr. Norton’s chair. “I think it is the best he has done yet.”

No one was more surprised than Mr. Norton himself—but he was both flattered and delighted. Mildred might perhaps have been a little touched had she known how extreme was his gratification at the little action and the attitude of friendly familiarity. He admired her, to use his favourite adverb “awfully,” although his own taste was inclined to a preference for a “showier style of woman;” and though he had never taken her dislike to heart, he was much elated by this unexpected attention. As he told his wife later, it looked well; and it showed too that Mildred was coming out of her shell and was beginning to exert herself.

He smiled up at her with an almost

nical mixture of incredulity and pleasure, and then read his son's verses with herly pride. They served as food for remarks till Heathcote rose to go; for Mr. Norton could not sufficiently impress on his hearers the fact that never before had a Norton shown any poetical notions.

PART II.
RUPERT.

CHAPTER I.

MR. NORTON AT HOME.

ONE gloriously fine afternoon two weeks or so later, Rupert Heathcote rode from Thornlea to Lynton, the village three miles off, where the Nortons lived. The country in that part was uninteresting and ordinary enough, but under a sky of such blue, softened by little white clouds of unshaded brightness, and steeped in such golden sunlit air, the flat meadows, even the unpicturesque cottages and lanes, the trees in full summer foliage, caught a beauty and glory.

To Rupert, riding leisurely along the well-known lane and past the familiar places, the radiance of sky and earth, the

happy abandon of the summer weather, seemed to throw into harsh and violent relief the tragedy so fresh in his mind. It was the strangest experience to find himself here again, taken so suddenly from the solitary, inactive life he had been leading, apart from his fellows—seeing them as did the Lady of Shalott, through a mirror—and plunged all at once into the interests of worldly and family life, intensified tenfold by the dark mystery of his father's end.

He had wandered about the world in his utter freedom to come and go as he listed, with no reference to any one's wishes but his own, as completely an unattached unit as any man could wish or not wish to be. His unhappy home-relations had deeply affected his character and modes of thought. The sight of his mother's neglected and uncheered days had embittered him towards his father; for he had loved and worshipped his mother with all the force of a warm nature intolerant of injustice and wrong. Then his own sense

of being in the way, of being unacceptable where Lewis was so beloved, feeling this partly on his own account and partly as an insult and additional sorrow to his mother, further roused his resentment. He, the son, was coldly thought of and slighted; Lewis, his rival, the son of his dear mother's rival, was put over his head. The injury was two-edged and hurt both his pride and love. His father's coldness forced into unnatural repression the warm impulses of his own heart—the ardent and pitiful sympathy for his mother bereft him of the youthful gladness of spirit that would in happier circumstances have been his; he was driven back into extreme reserve. He grew cynical and cold. He was defrauded of certain rights as son and man, and the ever-present consciousness of this induced a proud sensitiveness that led to his taking very good care to keep disentangled from his fellows.

The painful memories of the old unhappy days, brought back by the familiar places through which he passed, by no

means served to put him in cue for a morning call. As he drew near Lynton he tried to shake himself into a more suitable frame of mind and get up some interest in the duty before him by thinking of the people he was going to see. Unhappily they were too closely associated with the recent catastrophe for him to derive any benefit from this attempt. Mrs. Norton, pleasant and bright as she was, had appeared to him first in the thickest of the gloom, and the shadow of it rested upon her, even upon that grotesque husband of hers; and Miss Loraine had been enveloped in the very cloud of horror itself, with her understanding and appreciation, her proffered sympathy. He had a half dread of meeting her—a sort of grudge of her realization of the miserable shock. It would have suited his fastidiousness better never to see again people he had met on that disastrous occasion. And that pale, slim girl knew too much, saw too deeply, realized too vividly.

He remembered the little incident of

the verses, when she had diverted so effectually that blundering, corn-treading uncle of hers. Heathcote was observant; he had noticed the surprise on the faces of Mr. and Mrs. Norton at the girl's act, and it had taken no great shrewdness to divine her motive. He had felt the relief at the time, but he was not grateful; he disliked being under an obligation, and he resented the perception that had seen the need; he had rather it had been unseen, unsuspected. He had a half shrinking from Mildred, and yet the prospect of seeing her was not without some fascination.

He was riding through Lynton now, which was rather a pretty village. The cottages were picturesque and smothered in creeping roses and ivy; their small front gardens gay and full with summer abundance of flowers. The square-towered church, grey, venerable, and ivy-mantled, stood withdrawn a little from the row of dwellings in sacred aloofness upon a rocky eminence. The sunlight fell softly upon its weather-beaten stones and upon the

quiet tombstones at its feet. At the end of the village began the wooden palings which hid the grounds of the manor-house, now known as Norton House, from the passers-by. They extended for some distance, the overhanging branches of the great trees behind giving shade and coolness to the lane.

Heathcote was nearing the abrupt curve where the palings went inwards for the large entrance gates, when the quiet of the road was discordantly broken by the sound of a loud and threatening voice.

"Be off, you loafing scoundrel!" smote the air with fierce dissonance. "Be off, I say, or I'll set my dogs at you! I'll hang you to the nearest tree! I'll drown you in the deepest hole of the river! I'll riddle you with shot!"

The list of these encouraging declarations was cut short by Heathcote's appearing in sight. Expecting to behold no less formidable a person than some new species of highwayman in all the old-fashioned pomp and panoply of his profession, he

felt it somewhat of a shock to confront the very domestic figure of Mr. Norton—certainly Mr. Norton, although at first glance he might have been taken for an under-gardener in irregular receipt of his wages. He grasped a gun, it is true, but a gun unlevelled, and, from the careless freedom of his handling, it was to be hoped, unloaded. As soon as he saw Heathcote, a change as of magic came over the fierceness of countenance and voice. He sprang forward and grasped Rupert's hand.

"Mr. Heathcote! my dear sir, how are you? You are struck by my belligerent aspect." Then, without waiting for assent or disclaimer, he darted a fiery glance at the tramp upon whose head such direful threats had rained. "Be off, you lazy good-for-nothing! Come in, Mr Heathcote, come in!" in dulcet cordiality, opening the gate to hospitable width.

Heathcote rode in. Mr. Norton looked back to give a last benediction to the beggar who was turning away.

"Now," cried he, "you've received fair

warning, so if ever you venture to show yourself at my gates again, you know what you may expect. I'm a man of my word, I can tell you, and I'll *show* you! Here! I say, *here!*" he shouted, as the man was moving slowly off. "Here!" The beggar stopped. "Don't be in such an awful hurry! If you really *are* hungry—mind, I don't believe a word of it! You're all alike, the lot of you, for lies—but if you *are* hungry, go up to the house and ask for some bread and cheese and a glass of beer." Mr. Norton laughed as if not wholly unconscious of his own inconsistency. "Here, Williams," to a gardener working near, "take Mr. Heathcote's horse, and tell the cook to give this impostor some bread and cheese and beer. D'ye hear, you villain? Follow that man." Heathcote dismounted; Williams led away his horse, followed by the tramp.

Flushed and elated by his summary proceedings, Mr. Norton turned for commendation to his companion as they walked towards the house.

"You are struck by my severity, Mr. Heathcote, but I assure you, that is the way I always treat those rascally beggars. They're all impostors, but they don't impose upon *me*. I give it 'em hot the first time, and that makes it the last. Ha! ha! They don't come again—no one cares to face me when I am once roused. I can be severity itself; and when occasion requires, why, Mr. Heathcote, I *am*."

"Few tramps would object to a severity that ended in bread and cheese and beer," said Heathcote, smiling.

"Mr. Heathcote," impressively, "I am not adamant. Your observation is keen—you have already discovered one of my chief characteristics. I am awfully generous—generous to a fault. I own it."

He tucked his gun more firmly under his arm, and tried to adapt his step to Heathcote's. Mr. Norton's mode of progress was, like himself, peculiar;—it was jerky, yet dignified; elastic to irregularity, yet firm; in brief, a trot majestic and erratic. His walk, his dilapidated garments, and

the fashion in which he tightly clutched his gun, combined in producing no common effect. A gun was the invariable companion of his rambles over estate and village, no matter whether it were the shooting season or not—the Norton temperament disdaining limitations of seasons. Mr. Norton and his gun went together as trippingly as Apollo and his lyre, or Cupid and his bow ; and as his mastery of his chosen instrument was notoriously something less than complete, he was enabled to strike as much awe on his approach as doubtless he considered to be only a fitting tribute to the head of the Nortons.

He had as many affectations as a man of genius, in particular the love for creating a sensation which on the part of the genius finds vent in paradoxes audacious enough to startle a very easily startled world ; and which, on Mr. Norton's part, led him to do and say the most outrageous things. He enjoyed the fancied distinction of eccentricity ; to imagine one person saying to another, " Did you hear what Mr. Norton

said the other day to so and so ? ” or “ Did you hear what Mr. Norton did last week ? ” gave him the glow of an infinite gratification. The same thirst for notice prompted him to fire off his gun in the middle of the night if sleep proved coy. It would let people know Alf Norton was awake, he said grimly. It did ; but perhaps the knowledge that his night was disturbed was less satisfactory than if gained some hours later.

“ You have been a long time coming to see us, Mr. Heathcote,” he observed.

“ I only came to Thornlea last night. I have had things to look after.”

“ Of course, of course. No man,” with a heavy sigh, as he pushed back to a more picturesque angle his tattered sunburnt straw hat, “ no man knows what the demands of business are better than I do. People envy me as an independent gentleman, a man of leisure. Mr. Heathcote,” fixing his restless eyes solemnly upon the other’s face, “ I don’t know what the word leisure means practically. I get none. I

haven't a moment of time to call my own."

"Indeed?"

"A man with an estate to look after can hardly be called a man of leisure. I'm the last man in the world to depute everything to hirelings. I'm awfully conscientious. You remember the place, of course?" as they went up the drive.

"Very well."

"But you will notice many changes. I've done my best to improve the estate—I've taken special pride in the gardens and greenhouses. I should very much like to get your opinion on the alterations I have made. My wife's niece shall show you the gardens and then you can judge."

"Rather a roundabout way of getting my opinion," thought Rupert.

"I will take you to the ladies at once," said Mr. Norton, as they drew near the house, which was a large, rambling, red-brick building of a strictly nondescript style of architecture. "This way, Mr. Heathcote. If we go through the shrubbery at

the foot of the garden here, we shall reach the lawn sooner. The young people are engaged in tennis. I have no time for play myself, but I'm a great advocate for out-door amusements."

They reached the edge of the shady shrubbery, which was picturesquely wild—nature being little interfered with by man ("*I* wanted to clear the whole thing away," explained Mr. Norton, as they passed through, "and make the place decent, but the ladies like it, and I'm not above humouring them")—and emerged upon the tennis-lawn.

An exceedingly bright and pretty scene was before them. The lawn was wide and well kept, and upon that part marked out for tennis, which was nearer the other side, slight young figures moved in the active, graceful movements of that prettiest of games. The gorgeous jerseys of the three young Nortons, and Kate's fantastic tennis costume supplied gay pieces of colour for the sun to glow upon. Mildred wore black. On the opposite side,

under the shadow of the large old trees, sat Gussy, and beside her, in an attitude of devoted attention, was the young curate, Arthur Temple.

"The young lady in the light dress," said Mr. Norton, leaning towards his companion and speaking in an elaborate stage aside, "is my niece, Miss Kate Norton. She and her mother live just outside Opplestone. Her father—my brother, you know—is dead. Those lads are my sons by my first wife. The present Mrs. Norton, you may not be aware, is my second. I'm proud of my boys, Mr. Heathcote. They're true Nortons, every inch of them—bold and dashing and impetuous, with all the well-known characteristics of the blood. Ah, your sister sees us," he added. "She is coming. Why doesn't Mildred come?" he growled discontentedly.

"Pray don't interrupt her," said Rupert.

He knew that Mildred was aware of their presence. He had seen her just glance round at the penetrating tones of

Mr. Norton's first whisper; but it was evident that she did not feel herself called upon to act as daughter of the house.

Gussy slowly crossed the lawn, an air of injury and dejection in every line of face and figure, and on reaching her brother lifted in mute resignation a soft, round cheek. Rupert bent down and did his duty by the cheek, but in no cordial frame of mind. Gussy should not exhibit quite so publicly her dislike of his return. It was too trying an advertisement of the peculiarity of his domestic relations hitherto. He inquired after her health somewhat stiffly, and Gussy's countenance grew still more unhappy.

Mildred was playing well, but excellent as he thought the opportunity for Heathcote's study of her grace, Mr. Norton could not put himself aside even for so desirable an object as the display of his wife's niece's accomplishments. Accordingly, he awoke the echoes and startled the players by calling out her name.

Mildred turned a cool, inquiring look in

the direction of the call. Mr. Norton made frantic beckoning signals, and, as needs must, she came across the lawn in obedience to them, but very slowly. As Rupert saw the reluctance with which she approached, his own shrinking at the meeting, strange to say, was lessened.

"Where's your aunt?" demanded Mr. Norton, frowning, as Mildred bowed slightly to Heathcote.

"In the drawing-room."

"Then you might just conduct Mr. Heathcote to her. You will excuse my hurrying away in this abrupt fashion, Mr. Heathcote. My time is so much occupied—I am on my way now to the stables. And I pay you the compliment of not making a stranger of you," with a smile of gracious condescension. "By the by, Mildred, Mr. Heathcote is awfully anxious to see the changes I've made in the gardens, so just take him round first, will you?"

Mr. Norton trotted away, chuckling inwardly at his powers of strategy evinced

by this delicate manœuvre. "It's not every man that would take so much trouble for a girl that's no blood-relation," thought he.

"I suppose you've come to take me home, Rupert?" said Gussy plaintively.

"I suppose it must come to that very soon," he replied. "But I don't consider myself called upon to interfere with your visits."

This was said rather coldly, and Gussy's lip trembled. She cast a forlorn, almost frightened glance at her brother, and then one of appeal at her friend. But Mildred stood aside, waiting for the end of the little conference between brother and sister, and watching the others.

"I suppose I can't stay here much longer," sighed Gussy.

"You wouldn't wish to condemn me to loneliness?" said Rupert, with an effort to speak kindly.

"I don't see that it would be any hardship to you," pouted Gussy. "You are used to being alone."

Mildred made a quick little movement, then fixed her gaze still more attentively upon the players, while Rupert gave his sister a look of blank surprise.

"You won't be left altogether to my tender mercies," he said languidly.

Gussy's blue eyes widened with an eager question.

"Aunt Eleanor has kindly consented to come and take care of you," said Heathcote.

"Aunt Eleanor!"

"She is coming to Thornlea the day after to-morrow."

"But I don't—need—any one to take care of me!" cried Gussy in dismay.

"No?" half smiling. "Then Aunt Eleanor shall only take care of me. But we need not keep Miss Loraine waiting while we discuss these details. They will hardly interest her. Are you going back to your friends, or to the house with me?"

"Mildred will take you." Gussy's voice was choked; she turned away abruptly.

"It is too bad to interrupt your game,"

said Heathcote, as Mildred moved to begin her duties of guide.

"Not at all," she replied.

That the conventional assurance was given courteously instead of merely stiffly was owing entirely, although he did not know it, to his sister's very openly expressed shrinking from him. Mildred was divided between vexation and pity as regarded Gussy. As she heard the short dialogue, she had been struck as never before by the girl's childishness, seeing it in the light of Rupert Heathcote's cold wonder. She felt almost uncomfortable at the exposure of Gussy's spoilt-child ways before this uncongenial brother of hers—disturbed with an irrational sense of responsibility, which was of course quite absurd. Part of her vexation was turned against Rupert for causing the slight discomfort. "He might be kinder," she thought, sorry for Gussy. "The poor child will find a terrible difference, I fear. Her saucy childish ways won't win much favour in the eyes of her new guardian.

He will imagine she is to be made a woman of. Poor Gussy! the process will be hard upon her. Still it *is* time she learned a little tact—if he is capable of wincing he must have winced just now.” And it was this fact which brought the kinder tone to her voice. She was very sorry for Gussy, but neither her partisanship for the sister, nor her prejudices against the brother, could prevent her from seeing his side and recognizing his claims to the forbearance of tact. The man was in trouble too; he had come among them as a stranger, he was there as a visitor—it was churlish to seek out his vulnerable point. And out of pure regret for his hurt feelings—supposing him to have any—she exerted herself to discuss the weather pleasantly as she walked by his side to the house.

END OF VOL. I.

1. The first part of the document discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all transactions. It emphasizes that proper record-keeping is essential for the transparency and accountability of the organization. The document outlines the various methods used to collect and analyze data, ensuring that the information is reliable and up-to-date.

2. The second part of the document focuses on the implementation of the proposed changes. It details the steps involved in the process, from the initial planning stage to the final execution. The document also addresses the potential challenges that may arise during the implementation phase and provides strategies to overcome them.

3. The third part of the document discusses the impact of the proposed changes on the organization's overall performance. It highlights the expected benefits, such as improved efficiency and cost savings, and provides a detailed analysis of the potential risks. The document concludes by emphasizing the need for ongoing monitoring and evaluation to ensure the success of the implementation.

